

Jim of the Ranges



G · B · LANCASTER

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J. S. Dunford

JIM OF THE RANGES



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JIM OF THE RANGES

BY

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"THE TRACKS WE TREAD," ETC.

TORONTO

THE COPP CLARK CO. LIMITED

Printed by BALLANTYNE, HANSON & Co.
At the Ballantyne Press, Edinburgh

TO
THE TWO WOMEN I LOVE BEST

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JIM OF THE RANGES

CHAPTER I

JIM OF THE RANGES

THE gum-trees were white in the sickening heat. The grass of the clearing was colourless, and the smoke from the shanty-chimney went up straight to the colourless sky. About the half-score men on the shanty-verandah lay piles of saddle-gear, and empty pannikins, and scraps of greasy papers, and the blackened dottles of pipes.

The men had a day's work behind them, and lonely night-rides before; but they were spread in the hot shade now, slapping at the thirsty mosquitoes, talking in clipped sentences, and waiting the coming of the Buntree coach with the mail.

And then the coach came, swinging from the track and into the clearing with a lurch. The five horses, grown old in cunning, propped instantly, stretched their necks, and shook every inch of their sweating bodies until the old coach rocked with the strain.

On the verandah the men began to move like bees stirred with a stick, and someone spoke.

"Only Saltire an' a kid," he said. "Not wuth gittin' out o' the shade fur."

But to the Kid there was no lack of interest in the day or in the occasion. He sat alone on the box-seat, whence the driver had dropped two minutes back, and stared at the crowding men who unbuckled straps and flung harness from the dripping horses, or reached eager hands for the bundles of letters and papers that the driver tossed out to them. Beside the coach Saltire, Police Inspector for the district, stood on the grass, mopping his bald head with a handkerchief and gasping.

"Good Scott!" he said, "I'm warping. Well, Marks? How do, Daley? Any chance of getting some tea over there?"

The Kid climbed down and felt his feet on the crisped grass, where the heat seemed to rise as though someone worked a hot blast below. And for the moment he turned giddy. He was town-bred, and this burst into a new world was sudden as a slap in the face. The smell of horses and hot tramped earth and crude tobacco struck harsh on his nostrils; and the sense of vigorous life, of something keener and more primitive than he had known in his office beneath a Melbourne street, struck deep at the slumbering manhood in him.

"What are they doing?" he asked of Saltire.

A yell from the verandah made answer. A round, apple-cheeked man slapped his knee with a roar of delight, ran down the steps, and faced round to meet the line of grinning faces above him.

"What? What?" they howled at him. "No fear, Hack. Jim didn't git yer out o' that. He weren't there. What'd she do, Hack?"

"My troubles," said Hack. "Go an' ask her."

He plucked the felt hat from a man who lay spread

with its shade on his face, spun it up on the shanty-roof, and fled before the hat's owner round the end of the wall. Saltire grinned, looking at the Kid.

"Some bun-worry of their own," he said. "Hallo, Nick; I thought you were up in the Riverina."

By the spring of the shoulders under the loose coat, and by the light rolling step, the Kid guessed that here was a bushman who knew the saddle even as the ordinary man knows his bed. He drew back, and Nick looked down on the fat Police Inspector with amused, tolerant eyes.

"An' I thought you had your thumb on every man soon's he crossed the Murray, sir," he said.

"I've been in Melbourne a fortnight," said Saltire, and laughed. "Are you back in Buntree for good, Nick? And is there tea over there?"

"Mrs. Wiggins'll certain hev some. But the boys was dry. Well, yes, sir. Jack West an' me are startin' dredgin' near Buntree. I've chucked the overlandin' for a while."

His eyes touched the Kid and left him again. The Kid flushed, following in Saltire's wake as the tide of men turned back to the shanty. Sun and heat filled the clearing as water fills a cup, and the heavy air was motionless. But the very atmosphere prickled with the vigour of life, with the knowledge of fast-flowing red blood, of animal courage, and brute strength; and above the noise of talk the Kid heard Nick's alert tones.

"The biggest mob o' brumbies seen between Yackandandah an' the St. Bernard this year. Yes, sir; we got him. Wouldn't be back here if we hadn't."

"Got what?" demanded the Kid, suddenly brave.

"The Matchlock colt," said Saltire. "Deans must

have been half-crazy, Nick. He was saving that colt for the Cup."

"He was wuth savin', " said Nick, and again the Kid flushed at his careless glance. "Bin out near a week, an' he took some cuttin' an' tailin'. If Jim hadn't bin along wi' his old mare we'd be tailin' still, I guess."

"Jim?" Saltire halted. "Jim Kyneton? Is he here to-day?"

"Yes. Bathin' in the crik." Nick jerked a thumb toward a wattle-clump where a strip of silver ran. "Him an' Hack Ellis come through Buntree las' night wi' cattle. They're goin' on in the mornin'."

"Still a rolling stone, is he?" asked Saltire. "I haven't seen him for long."

"Nor me. He's bin in Queensland. Hadn't run agin him for a year till he rode into Narraween home-stead las' night."

He nodded and turned across the baked grass to the creek. Saltire caught a passing man by the shoulder.

"Tell Mrs. Wiggins to send us out some tea, will you, Harry," he said. And then he found a couple of broken boxes under a stringy-bark, and offered the frailest to the Kid.

"You haven't come to my weight yet," he said. "For which you may thank Heaven this weather. Phew! It is hot."

The Kid did not take the box. He stood staring down the creek where a tall man with a wet black head came out in the sunlight to join Nick.

"Who's that?" he demanded.

"That? Jim Kyneton, 'Jim of the Ranges,' and don't you call him so if you value your life. He's an

easy-going beggar, but he has what Nick calls a great derry on skyte."

"'Jim of the Ranges.' I-It rings a bit lordly. But I like the l-look of him," ventured the Kid.

He watched the bareheaded man as he straightened from knotting his bootlace and wiped his forehead with his forearm. All about Jim the heat ran in ripples, to be beaten back by the steely wall of gums behind; and through it this tall son of the bush stood for sign and hall-mark of the beginning of his race, when men measured their bodies against the elements and conquered, before craft and cunning and cash had awaked to rule the world. He suggested the kind of talk that is made with shut hands and shut lips; the kind of bravery that brings body instead of coin to fight for its beliefs, and the Kid breathed faster as he looked.

At his side Saltire laughed.

"Like the look of him? Probably you do. He strips better than any man I've seen in the Ring, and he's a sweet-tempered chap, too. More than Nick is. But they're a fine-looking couple. Foster-brothers, and different as day from dark. Nick's a case-hard sinner. But—he knows how to love Jim. And here comes our Hebe with the tea. A bit frowsy, isn't she? Thank you, Mrs. Wiggins. Yes, we'll bring the mugs back ourselves——"

"... Fer if them fellers gits a holt o' them," whined Mrs. Wiggins. "I dunno. You know. They carn't 'elp smashin' things, sir. As I sez ter Wiggins——"

"Yes, I understand, Mrs. Wiggins. We'll bring them. Don't wait in the heat. Thank you."

Saltire smiled gravely at the Kid as the lean, draggled piece of womanhood slouched back to the shanty.

"All our bushwomen are not like that," he said. "You'll see better in Buntree. Jim Kyneton's mother lives there. A lady to her finger-tips, she is. Kyneton was a rough diamond; very rough. Killed in a row out west, and she must have thanked God for it. But Jim would have ranked up as a gentleman all right if he'd gone into an office, or something of the sort. He is not built that way though. The saddle and the open air, and the sky for his roof-tree . . . that's Jim Kyneton, and I don't know that our town-bred men can better him. I—I beg your pardon. Nothing personal intended."

The Kid flushed up again as he looked at his neat feet and hands.

"T-That's all right," he said. "I don't think too much of myself, you k-know. I-I've always lived in a t-town, but the doctor's sent me t-to the country, and I don't know that I'll be much' good at it. But I've g-got to try. What? Y-Yes. Dredging. As a common hand, you know."

From the suggestion of pluck in the quick, boyish smile Saltire turned with pursed lips.

"Hum," he said slowly, and stirred his tea with a gumstick.

The foster brothers crossed to the verandah with long swinging strides, and the Kid's eyes followed them eagerly. The labour of the day testified from their torn, dusty clothes and their red, scratched hands. But they were as two positive poles to the Kid, and even in that moment he felt the double attraction that would nearly pull him in half later on.

Behind the two a tattered, bare-legged boy tailed across the clearing, kicking a tomato-tin before him.

He was droning some words in the nasal Australian twang.

“Jim-my, Jim-my. Jim. Jim. Kyneton.”

Jim reached the verandah, turned, and lounged against the rails, with his hands slid through his belt and his slow, humorous eyes on the boy. But he did not speak, and the boy turned the words to an anthem.

“Jim. Jim. Jim-Jimmy-Jim. Jim. Jimmy Kyneton.”

The boy kicked the can into the group of men and halted. Jim raised his voice.

“Yes?” he said slowly. “That’s me. What were you singin’ out my name all across the clearin’ for? I’m not a bit out of a comic op’ra.”

From the heavy boots to the wide-rimmed hat Jim was clean-run, clean-living, and clean-hearted. Health showed in the easy poise of the long limbs; mastery of self showed in the strong face built to the well-moulded throat, and in the firm, up-turned curve of the lips. But the grace in him made for refinement somewhere, and that inner strength which mates of his well knew had stamped itself over all.

“Collins ’as got ’is team up on Blackboy Sidin’,” said the boy, and thrust out a pink, thumb-stained envelope. “I telled him ’e’d got ter stop there till I gived yer this.”

“Thank you, sonny.”

Jim’s hand closed on the note calmly. But the blood ran to his forehead at sight of the writing.

“An’ it’s from Roseen, an’ she wants a arnswer,” concluded the boy.

A bellow of laughter split the hot air, and the Kid saw faces turn curiously to Jim. But Jim gave no

heed. He opened the paper and read it. Then he dropped astride a felled log brought for the firing; spread the blank side of the sheet uppermost, and wrote some half-dozen lines with a pencil. He folded it; slid it back in the envelope, and handed it back to the boy.

"Here you are, sonny. Thanks. Now—scoot. Collins will be waitin'."

"Reckon he'll keep, will Collins," said the boy. "Full as a dook, he is, an' needin' me ter take the team down the sidin'."

He swaggered past the lounging men, fell as a man gripped his leg, and yelled from the midst of a savage scuffle in the dust:

"Jim-my, Jimmy, ole man. Soutar's shook yer letter."

Nick wheeled in a flash, and the Kid's teeth came together in a sudden jar at sight of the fury of eyes and face.

"You ——" (it was an oath new to the Kid). "What d'you mean——?"

"Soutar is tellin' me what he means, Nick."

Jim's voice was quiet and rather low. But it carried far in the silence about the dull, unpainted shanty, where the men drew in their knees and sat up, watching alertly.

"I only speaks ter the man I'm wantin' ter," growled Soutar, aiming a side-kick at the boy.

"I'm the man you're wantin' ter speak to," suggested Jim.

He laid his pannikin aside and stood up. And some force brought Soutar to his feet opposite, with the little pink scrap shut in his hand.

"Perhaps you were meanin' to be funny," said Jim.

“Even a clever man has lapses sometimes. So—give me that, Soutar, an’ we’ll leave it.”

He held out his hand, standing still. Saltire drummed his nail on his teeth.

“By looks you might judge Soutar the quicker,” he said. “But he isn’t.”

The Kid shivered in the grip of the fighting instinct. And he had never seen a fight.

“I’ll take it to her ter-night,” said Soutar. “I’m goin’ there.”

“Give me that letter.”

“You go ter ——. I’m goin’ to marry Roseen, an’ I won’t hev her writin’ to you.”

Nick, watching with keen eyes, saw no change in Jim. But his ear read a new note into the tone.

“Give me that letter.”

Soutar’s laugh was impudent, and he thrust the pink paper into his shirt. And then Jim moved with one of the swift, flashing impulses which those who knew him best occasionally forgot to allow for, and Soutar felt the full column of his height and strength very close.

“Give me that letter,” he said. “I won’t tell you again. . . . Thank you.”

He took it, unheeding Soutar’s cowed snarl; sought in his trouser-pocket, and put a shilling in the boy’s hand with the crumpled note.

“Now, you cut along back to your team, my man,” he said. “Don’t be too hard on old Collins. What? Yes, I’m comin’, Bob.”

He caught the halter flung by the old grizzled Narra-ween stockman on the steps, and Saltire stood up.

“I saw the Matchlock colt back in the cow-yard just

now," he remarked. "I suppose Jim is going to rope him in. Come and see it?"

"Why don't they wait till evening?" demanded the Kid, coming out into the glare.

"They've got to get home before to-morrow's work," said Saltire dryly. "Besides, they're not clothed as you are."

The Kid's sticky fingers felt for his neck-stud. He ripped off his collar and stuffed it in his pocket. Then something of self-respect came to him. Already he was sloughing outside ordinances.

Across the clearing men followed Jim in twos and threes. And the sound of feet brushing the dried grass, the sense of strong careless life, the memory of the wide spaces of earth and sky separating him from all that was known of old, kindled the new spirit in the Kid. Here, in one little hour, he tasted keener sensations than had been his daily food all his life. Well Saltire knew the men who are the fibres and filaments of Australia, for his work called them to him many times, and many times the Kid had passed them in the city streets. But there they were forest trees ripped up by the roots. Here they grew in their own soil, with the red of earth's ironstone in their blood; and its granite in their nerve; and its shallows and deeps, its dead-levels and its heights, in their temperaments. Men, these, who had measured off Australia's miles with their own two-foot rule; who had drank in her way-back shanties and starved in her cities; who took her whole wide lands for their possession when the shearing-sheds called from the north and the gold-fields called from the west, when there was grain to harvest in Victoria or horses to break on the Sydney side; and men, too,

one and all, whose habits the Kid had yet to learn, and whose mercy and mercilessness was to be proven on his own body.

The Kid skirted the smother of dust where the crowd came to the cow-yard rails, and stared at Jim moving through the enclosure with his steady, supple swiftness. The Matchlock colt had an evil temper, and the best quarters and crest ever seen on a horse. But the Kid knew nothing of that. He only watched with shining eyes; and then he jumped as the colt leapt forward with a snort, the slip-rails fell, and Jim sprang past swiftly, gripping the halter close under the throat.

"Prettily done," said Saltire at the Kid's ear. "Watch, now."

The colt lifted his feet cleanly, and there was fire in the fling of his head. But the Kid's eyes clung to the man who ran beside, with one brown muscular arm upreached to the frothing jaws and a strong back and bare head braced close to the heaving shoulder. Swamping gold lay over the clearing, and beyond Jim shone the silver of the creek where shadows fell, long and smudgy. Then the colt ducked with both heels flung up, and Jim cried out in sharp warning as Nick came alongside. And then the gold left them, and they passed into the shadows where Harrison waited. But the picture of these two men who were to shape the Kid's life only left his brain with his breath. The picture of the quivering yellow light; the vivid strength of the great black horse; the tall, straight-limbed foster-brothers, with the sun on their faces and the laughter on their mouths. At his elbow Saltire spoke:

"There's our whip on the box-seat, and they're putting in the horses. Come along, young one."

There were a bunch of men about the Matchlock colt, and in the centre Jim's bare dark head showed, ringed in by grinning faces. The Kid spoke wistfully as the fresh horses leaned forward to their work and the coach lurched up to the track again.

"Will any of those men be coming on the Buntree?" he asked.

"Most of 'em." The driver felt for the brake, got his foot on it, and wrapped the reins round his hands. "Yes. They'll be along like a swarm o' bees d'rectly. Sit tight."

The track slewed sharp round, bringing windy scents out of the distances and a sight that rushed the Kid's heart into his mouth.

Half the world lay at gaze below; aloof, sternly apart as are the mountains of the moon. Deep down, a torrent shredded out its white flesh in the black rocks, but across the chasm a riot of sunshine lay, golden and glorious. And the distance was sheen of bush and shimmer of rock. It was a network of spurs, hazy as the purple bloom on ripe fruit. And last, it was the pure snow ranges withdrawn among their clouds as a young soul is withdrawn from the careless touch. The sense of utter calm and wide solitude, of majesty too mighty for man swept down on the Kid, shaking him for ever out of the nice conventionalities of life and stirring in him more than would be easily laid again.

From behind came Nick's voice in a rousing shout.

"Hi! Bill. Let us by."

Bill pulled his team in under the live rock with a grin.

"Told yer," he said.

Knee to knee Jim and Nick spun by, bringing a rush of wind and a virile life that tingled the men on the

coach. Jim rode inside, and the Kid saw for an instant the play of muscle down the bare throat, the tense vigour of the leaning body, and the eager, sun-dark face that showed white forehead where the hat blew up. They passed, and the hunt swept up behind them with whip-cracks and clamour that split the air, closed round the brothers, and bore them with it into the deepening shadows.

“Jim! Jim of the Ranges. Jim!”

Hack was shouting it, defying Jim’s endeavour to pull him out of the saddle. And across the hills and up the gullies the echoes gave answer, soft, mocking, insistent:

“... o’ the Ra-a-a-anges. Jim-m-m-m.”

For a Police Inspector, Saltire was sometimes unpractical. “Sounds as if his own were really calling him, doesn’t it?” he said.

“That’s right,” said Bill. “So they are. So they will be callin’ of him—when he carn’t answer.”

“What’s that?” Saltire spoke sharply. “Why can’t he answer?”

“Cos ’e’s stickin’ ’is ’ead in the bight o’ a rope—no offence meant, Mr. Saltire, sir. Jinin’ the P’leece, Jim is, an’ a blarsted young idjit—meanin’ no offence again, sir.”

“None taken, Bill,” said Saltire in the vernacular, and curiosity flicked the Kid into swift speech:

“Where is he going in? What for? When, Bill?”

Bill answered on the principle of an inverted bucket.

“He’s goin’ in cos ’e’s a barmy young idjit. I telled yer that. In Melbourne. When ’e’s done this trip he was sayin’.”

“Ah,” said Saltire, with a long breath. “That’s

good work. We can do with more of his calibre in the Force. I must get him up here later."

"Shows yer sense," agreed Bill. "Jim cud foller up a bandicoot what'd got a half-day's start. He's bit o' all right at bush-work, is Jim."

He fell silent, chewing his plug. Saltire lit another pipe, and the Kid stared at the lights shifting on the distances until a turn of the road brought them on the brothers, riding alone and slow, with reins loose and hands deep in their pockets. Jim looked up, and the Kid took part of the swift, frank smile to himself. But the smile passed with the coach, and Jim turned in the saddle, taking in the cloud on Nick's face with one of those quick, up-cut glances that were peculiar to him.

"Don't let it git you down an' worry you, Nick," he said.

"I got suthin' to ask you," began Nick, and kicked his stirrups.

Jim's eyes were on him still with their straightly humorous look.

"Spit it out," he said.

"Did yer know about Soutar an' Roseen Mitchell before to-day?"

"No."

The eyes did not waver, but Nick saw the pain in them. He reined up.

"Jim, has she bin handin' out trouble to you?"

"Are you needin' to know?" asked Jim slowly.

"I think so. Yes."

There were many men who called Nick evil. There were more yet who called Jim good. But, because of the old bond between them, they were brothers in

love yet. Jim answered as he would have answered no other man.

"I was meanin' too much an' she wasn't meanin' enough. There can't be any half-way house wi' me an' Roseen. I can't see her again. That's all."

"Where did you meet her?"

"Euroa. I was there in the winter, an' she was staying wi' her aunt. She wouldn't answer me then. I got her answer to-day."

"Out there! By——! Doesn't that show you she's just what men call her? The rottenest little flirt——"

"Don't you say that again, Nick."

"Yes, I will, too. She's——"

"Nick!"

It was a sharp silence, full with possibilities. The eyes met, hard and angry, and the uneven breaths shook their bodies. Then Jim said:

"You an' me haven't ever had a row yet, Nick, an' I don't want that ever we will. So you'll just keep your tongue off her for always. She's goin' to marry Soutar; but I love her, an' if ever I hear any man livin' speak ill o' her, that man's got ter settle wi' me. Now, we'll git on."

The strong, clean air was life and blood to the mountain-born men, and the spring of the horses was joy. But in this hour gladness had gone out of them. The dark flush of pride and wrath was on Jim's face yet. For, by every count, by every tally that life nicks on a man's being, he knew Soutar for the cur that he was, and he knew that Soutar had won where he had lost.

On the ranges the last rays paled to ash, and all earth's colour was sucked up into the sky. The fluttering pink in the bush-gully below was quick come and

quick gone as a young girl's blush ; but in the western sky, behind the farthest snow-cone, floods of strong crimson pumped up and down like a man's heart-blood. The track steepened, and ahead showed a gleam of tin-roofing, of deadwood fences, and half-stumped land. The tinkle of a cow-bell floated up, telling curfew, and above the twitter and rustle and the sense of breathing, unseen life around, rang a loud, long call, snapping short as a whip-crack snaps. Far across the darkening gully came the answer in two notes, low and clear and tender. Jim shut his teeth together. Even as the coach-whip bird he had called to his mate in the ranges. But she had not answered him so.

Again the Kid heard horses coming and saw the riders go by. Hack Ellis left the knot about the coach to thrust in between the brothers, and Bill grunted, shifting his quid.

"Suthin' like a tater on end atween a couple o' wheat-ears," he said. "Wouldn't you like ter rope in Nick too, Mr. Saltire ? "

"Not on your life ! Nick's born to break more laws than he keeps. No ; I've got the pick of your men, and when I have him back here I'll be content. Good heavens ! what's wrong ? Bill——"

The off-wheeler had caught his bit in the leader's swingle-tree, and he screamed and kicked like a devil possessed. The men ahead had turned as one at the sound. But Jim was out of the saddle first, and the Kid cried out to see him dive in among the plunging horses. Saltire nodded approval.

"You've got spunk, Kid," he said. "You're not thinking of yourself, and we're just on the rim of eternity."

Bill stood up on the brake and chewed his cud.

"If any one kin straighten 'em afore we're over the aidge Jim can," he said. "You two'd best git—while yer got the chanst."

The blood of his pioneer ancestors prickled along the Kid's veins. He sat still. And five minutes later he had his reward when Jim stood out in the dulling track, and said :

"You haven't got a white-livered load up there, Bill. Give me a light somebody, will you? My pipe's out."

Towards them suddenly, out of the dark, beat the roar of hoofs, now loud on the harder ground, now low where the earth lay soft. Jim's trained ear picked up the translation instantly.

"Betty," he said. "That's Myall's gallop. And she'll have Sinner along. You'd best wait, Bill. Sinner barks his head off at a horse, and those brutes of yours aren't sweet to-night."

"Stop her," said Saltire suddenly. "I want to ask her about Mrs. Morgan's pigs."

"Come on, Nick," said Jim, and turned down the track, grinning. "We'll stick her up. She won't stay for a call. You can't bounce Betty for sour apples."

Betty had been a waif from somewhere when Jim's mother took her and brought her up, half-a-boy among boys. And she was son and daughter both to the lonely mother now in the stone house in the gully four miles from Buntree.

Down the gray thread of track they saw her coming, with the dog leaping beside like a fluttering shadow of the night. And half-forgotten memories stirred the two men who waited for her. It was four years since they had stood together to meet Betty. But she had

been much to them once. She had been burned and scalped alive in the Red Indian era, she had been robbed and bound to trees when the bushranging passion was rife; she had fished with them, shot with them, ridden any horses that they chose to put under her, and she had gone out of their lives as utterly as the snows of last year on Buffalo, when they came to manhood and tasted of its fruits.

The men watched, drawing on their pipes, and their pulses beat sharper; for Betty came like a wild thing blown from the night, and then her face showed distinct and laughing, where the bronze curly hair and the hat blew back. She did not see the coach, and she swerved from the two.

"Don't stop me," she cried. "You won't get any tea if you do. I've got to be home first. Nick——"

Either side her a man reached at the bridle and the great-hearted black fell back on his haunches, with red nostrils wide and the lather flung from them.

Saltire watched her in the envy that always diluted his approval of Betty, for she had so much that had never been his. She was built on the breezy quarter-deck plan; vital as the wind that frays the foam from the wave-tip, and with a dash of its clean, stinging salt in her speech and the bright blue of its sea in her eyes. A man had once called Betty "Life Incarnate." This was in the days when she wore bare legs and chased Nick up gum-trees; but she was splendid life still in her strong young maidenhood, and sound and sweet with the training that boy-comradeship had taught her.

"What is it?" she cried. "I'm in such a hurry, and my fingers are sticking through the paper on the sausages. Oh, I didn't see the coach. Any letters for

me, Bill? Mr. Saltire, Mother Morgan has found her pigs, and so she's forgiven everybody, and she's going to church next week. What is it, boys? Oh, you're not going to say you're not coming home, are you?"

"No," said Jim. "We're comin' to tea. But we're going to the township wi' the fellows first, Betty."

Betty had nodded to several gravely. Something of the gladness had gone from her.

"Oh," she said. "Must you? But you're coming to tea—and to stay the night? Auntie Katherine expects——"

"Can't," said Nick briefly. "Got suthin' better on, my dear."

Betty gathered the reins. Her head drooped.

"I don't know how to tell Auntie," she said. "She has counted on it so. She hasn't had you both together for years and years."

Jim bit his lips. The savage in him wanted noise and drinking to deaden his pain to-night. Then his other nature came uppermost.

"You needn't tell her. I'm comin' for tea, an' for the evenin', an' for the night. Nick can do as he likes. I'm comin', Betty."

"You go an' bury yerself," cried Nick in swift wrath. "You're stayin' in the township."

Jim stooped, gripping Sinner's collar as the coach rattled by.

"Tell mother we'll be up in an hour, an' I'm stayin' the night. An' keep your eyes peeled on the sidin', Betty. It was full o' boggy little holes when I came up it yesterday."

He watched Myall's strong quarters and Betty's slim back dip down the siding. Then he looked at Nick.

"I reckon we're owin' them that much—if they want it," he said.

On the swaying coach the Kid nodded, half-asleep. He was in a new land ; a land of swift tree-shadows that sank now and again to show a vague distance of rolling country ; a land of rattling wheels and of occasional shouts from unseen men as the coach spun by. The snarl of a river came out of the dark. The Kid sat up and blinked. Against the dark of earth and the paler sky showed specks of red light—home-lights, calling men back to food and rest. He shuddered a little. To this far-off place he had come alone—to be a man.

Bill's elbow jolted him into full wakefulness.

"Wake up, carn't yer ? There's Buntree. Where you goin' ? What yer doin' here, eh ? "

"I'm g-going on a dredge," explained the Kid. "*The Stars and Stripes.*"

"Lord ! " Bill spat out his plug. "You are, are yer ? That's where Jack West an' Nick berlong. You'll hev ter git up airly if yer wants ter git ahead o' them."

"Nick ! " the Kid breathed short. "He's a b-bit hard, isn't he ? "

"Isn't he ? " mocked Bill. "Well, he ain't pap, Nick ain't. Nor Jack neither. Don't you go sharpenin' yer teeth on them chickens. But take 'em pretty an' they're bits o' all right. Git up—loafers."

The lash snarled round. The team sprang along the bridge, where a loose board flapped like a flail. It raced across a section where rung trees played ghost's hide-and-seek, and clattered up the main street of Buntree with its shingle side-walks and its ill-kept centres, its boarding-houses, its public-houses, and its little wood or wattle-and-daub shanties.

Before a low door, where a lamp swung and the smell of stale beer rose on the night, a knot of riders were dismounting, and Saltire climbed down in stiff haste. The bar was full, and voices rose and fell like a neap tide. But Saltire's keen eyes found the man he was seeking at the horse-trough, with his arm round the bay mare's neck. He slid through the crowd where they came and went, talking and wiping their mouths.

"Jim," he said.

Jim straightened, moved his arm, and looked down. Beneath the smile of the eyes Saltire saw pain. But the voice was hearty.

"How are you, sir? I was hopin' to see you. I'm enterin' the Melbourne Depot."

"I just heard so. And I'm glad. Very glad. I'll have you back here soon as they let you go. But I came about something else, Jim."

In swift, low sentences he spoke of the Kid. Jim's eyes grew graver.

"I don't see what I can do, sir," he said. "A fellow has to stand on his own feet. Once let the idea git about that he's needin' coddlin' an' you're layin' up trouble for him, good an' strong."

"I know that. But I thought that if you gave Nick a hint——"

Jim slid the reins through the ring and hooked them.

"Where is he, sir?" he asked, and followed with Saltire into the low, crammed passage, through two doors, and across another passage to Saltire's private room.

"He had nowhere to go," said Saltire. "And he's dog-tired."

Jim nodded. And then the Kid, standing by the

window and staring into the lonely night, turned at the sound of voices and gulped as Jim grinned down on him. He was home-sick and tired out, and, partly, he was afraid. And Jim of the Ranges came to him as something strong and living and warm. Jim's hand-grip squeezed his bones and sprang the tears to his eyes. But he bit his lip and grinned back.

"Mr. Saltire tells me you're goin' on the *Stars and Stripes*," said Jim. "I know all the fellows on that. What work are you takin'?"

There was the slow Australian break on the vowels which turns some of the words into a kind of caress. And there was a wide brotherliness about the man that brought speech straight from the Kid's heart.

"There's a l-lot to do damming up the river n-now it's so low," he explained. "I s-start at that. Then I'll be fireman or s-something."

Jim glanced round. Saltire had gone. For Saltire understood men.

"Ever done this sort of work among these sort o' men before?" he asked abruptly, and knew the answer before it came.

"No? But you're set on it?"

"I've got to live out of doors where the climate's healthy, and I've g-got to earn m-my living while I do it," said the Kid.

"Unskilled labour," murmured Jim. "Yes, I see. Now"—he looked the Kid straight in the eyes—"you're not thinkin' you're on a soft lay, are you? You're not one of the fellows, you know, an' they won't go out o' their way to make things easier for you because of that."

"I know," said the Kid, reddening. "But I'm

p-pretty strong, and I won't funk. Perhaps if you—t-they say your b-brother is—is on the *Stars and Stripes*," he suggested awkwardly.

Jim thrust his hands deep in his pockets and walked over to the window. There was a short silence in the little room where Saltire did his work when he came to Buntree. Then Jim said :

"My brother is just the chap for those that can go the pace with him. I don't know if I could now. But I know that you can't. I wouldn't hear another man speak against him, but I've got to tell you. He's not the sort for you to get thick with. He'll give you a rough time if he doesn't cotton to you—an' he'll give you a hell of a worse time if he does." He wheeled with a sudden swiftness that he seldom showed and crossed to the Kid. "Look at me," he commanded, and then face and voice softened before the bleary eyes uplifted in the gloom. "There's just one thing for you to remember," he said. "Nobody can teach you to drink, an' curse, an' gamble but yourself. Nobody can mess your life up for you but yourself. I shouldn't wonder if one or two tried—just for the fun of it, you know. But don't you let 'em do it. D'you hear? If I come back an' find you've turned out a bad potato I'll be sorry. You know that, don't you?"

He smiled down on the Kid, and the Kid caught his hand impulsively.

"I w-wish you were going to stay here," he blurted out.

"I'm comin' back," said Jim, and laughed. "I'm comin' back wi' power to run you in if I don't like your goin's on. An' I'll do it. Don't you make any mis-

take about that. "He looked the Kid over with his swift, keen eyes. "Can you box?" he asked.

"Box?" the Kid went red and his voice changed. "That's a sin, isn't it?"

"Where did you learn that?"

"I t-taught in Sunday school. I thought——"

"I see." Jim looked at him reflectively. "Well, some of the best men I know can use their hands like a professional, and that has helped to keep them good. They don't often need to use them, mind you. But there's a lot of moral support in knowing how. You chew on that, and learn to put your hands up scientifically when the chance comes. It'll do you heaps of good."

Two minutes later the Kid leaned from the window as the two brothers raced their horses up the street, with a knot of men on the curb shouting after them. Then he drew a long breath.

"T-That fellow knows life," he said.

Down at the little stone house in the gully Betty also was realising this. She stood alone in the long, low, flagged kitchen where the dead wood in the great open chimney shot out tongues of scarlet and green to the kettles swinging above, and a kitten played with the cut-and-thrust of light about the chair-legs and the coarse table-linen, and her eyes halted on the bunch of letters and post-cards that waited for Jim by the chimney-piece clock. For years such-like bundles of letters had stood there for Jim. They came in women's hand-writing; bold and black, or finely writ. They came with addresses running into one corner; with uncertain spelling and clumsy characters. And their sealed envelopes shouted to her of people who knew

Jim's life as she did not know it ; of places where Jim had fought and loved and worked ; of things which he had done and said, and never had told to her. Jim's mother read her out the post-cards sometimes. Joking messages from girls ; curt greetings or questions from men ; vague allusions to that wide life which Jim lived, and where she might not tread.

Then she turned impulsively to the woman who came up the room behind her with the free, easy step that might have been Jim's own.

"Auntie," she cried. "I wish they weren't coming. I wish they weren't. It will be like re-lighting a half-smoked cigar, and any man can tell you what that's like. It can never be the same as when they were boys. Oh, it can't."

When Katherine Graham forsook the golden apples on her family-tree to grub the earth for potatoes with Jim's labourer father she did it for love. What that love had cost her she never told ; but she offered daily and nightly prayers for the one strong son who carried something of his father's nature along with her own. She smiled at the girl.

"That won't do, my Betty. We must be content with what we can get. And we're getting it now, for they're coming. They're coming."

There grows a time into most women's lives when they feed on memory as a silkworm on mulberry leaves, spinning the gain into a web of endurance. That time was now for Katherine. But for Betty the mulberry leaves of remembrance were poison.

"It can't be the same," she told her heart. "He doesn't want me now. Oh, Betty ; don't be a fool. He doesn't want you, and you've got to know it."

She heard the strong voices ; the ring of heavy boots in the scullery ; she heard Katherine run to meet them with step light as a girl's. But she stood still, half in shyness, half in the young dignity of her womanhood. Her print frock fell plainly about her strong, splendid curves, and her crisping hair was knotted plainly at the nape of her neck. She was a woman of the bush ; vivid as the vivid land that bore her ; full of promise and undiscovered delights.

Nick looked at her as he came. Then he laughed, took her by the waist, and galloped down the kitchen with her, dropping beside her at last on the settle in the chimney-corner.

"That was good," he cried. "But you've grown up, Betty. You've grown up. You haven't got as much breath as you used ter. Is that age or—vanity?"

Jim's eyes fell on her in brotherly interest from where he sat with his arm about Katherine.

"I thought Nick had got a-hold o' Queen Elizabeth when we first come in," he said. "But it's only Betty now you've shook her hair down. Don't pin it up, Betty. I like it that way."

Betty's hands fell from the bronze curling mass, and she flung up her head like a young colt at pasture.

"Do you still pack scraps of history and geography in your brain, like bundles of draper's patterns?" she said tartly. "I should think you'd get mixed in the materials sometimes."

"So I do." Jim's eyes sought the letters on the chimney, and he got up. "So I do, Betty. I've mistook muslin for silk more'n once, an' maybe I will again." He shuffled the envelopes and glanced at Nick. "Here's a card from Ron Adams askin' who's

ridin' the Centipede now. My stars, I wish it was me. But he has no slouch of a fellow atop of him, wherever he is. Nick, are you ever goin' to forget that night on Monaro when we took down Bob Macrae ? ”

“ Am I goin' ter forgit I'm livin' ? Glory, Jim, what a skytin' little pup he was. Old Jerrons said——”

The talk swung from lightness to grim gray of tragedy, and round again. It flickered back and forth, touching many men's lives and some few women's. Betty listened to the names rolling off the tongue. Woolloon-gabba, Eucumbene, Wannanana, Lake Labyrinth, and a thousand more. She heard of Carisbrook, past owner of one of Queensland's great stations, and now “ hoofing the pad for tucker.” She heard of the spear-grass plains, where a horseman is lost as in a forest and the sharp-edged seeds fester in the flesh ; of the deep-sunk Blue Mountain ravines that have felt no man's feet ; of floods on the green Murray, and drought in the sandy west. She heard of the bleak townships scattered through the mallee-scrub ; of a crowded theatre-night “ in town ” ; of the red scorching winds at the big New South Wales mines ; of the sob of the surf past the You-Yangs when sunset lies over them red. And more than these two told they hinted, passing by as those to whom strange things have grown stale. And Betty listened and watched, watched with a half-painful sense of aloofness these two men who had once knelt with her at Katherine's knees, who had romped with her through the old garden, and fought with her on this very floor. But almost jealously she watched Katherine and Jim. They were so alike, so keenly alike. Through Katherine she would see Jim again and yet again when

he went out to where life was calling him, leaving the women behind.

Jim's eyes fell on her suddenly with the brotherly smile in them. He held out his hand.

"You've been feedin' us an' clearin' away the dishes, Betty," he said, "an' we haven't given you a show to talk. Nick was always a skytin' beggar, wasn't he? Old girl, I was rememberin', as we came along, that time when Nick an' me were enjoyin' a rare old scrap in the coal-house, an' you pulled us apart by the hair o' our skulls an' howled till we kissed each other an' you——"

The poppy-red flew to Betty's face. And it was not Nick's laugh that brought it there.

"You're thinking of someone you met somewhere else," she said. "There have been so many, you know."

"We're all truthful, o' course," said Jim, with the corners of his mouth twitching. "But we reserve the rights o' definin' truth to ourselves. I remember the smudge on your nose when we'd done kissin' you. We've learned to aim straighter now."

Betty's face burnt. They were all three laughing at her, and it stung. For these men stood apart in lives of their own, with tongues and eyes that guarded deep matters below the light surface. And to these men she was a plaything only.

"Don't grin like that," she cried furiously. "They're sure to call you 'Sunny Jim' when you go into the Force. And you'll hate that worse than 'Jim of the Ranges.'"

Jim laughed, flinging his arm round his mother.

"Hit fair in the solar-plexus," he said. "Shouldn't wonder if they do, Betty. Mother, I'm goin' out for a look at the horses, an' you can come an' give me a hand."

Nick an' me will yarn later. He's a loose end as ever he was, dear, an' he's got to take care that the rope don't fray out an' leather his own back."

Betty saw the frank affection in the brothers' eyes as they met, and she bit her lip in the swift pang of jealousy. It was true, bitterly true. Jim did not want her now. The mother of his childhood, the wild, brilliant mate of his manhood filled his life, and all the threads of the boy and girl friendship were broken. Jim was the kind of man his boyhood had promised, the kind of man old Nature turned out before her type became smudged and worn and shaky in alignment. And to Betty he was more apart than a stranger.

Through blinding tears she saw the two go down the kitchen, and over the fire Nick grumbled :

"He's the mos' everlastin' fusser under Heaven 'bout hosses. An' mother's jus' as bad."

But there was another thing that troubled Katherine just now, and she spoke it out to Jim when he came near with the remains of the filly's blown-over feed.

"Son of mine," she said ; "can you tell me what's wrong ? "

Jim started. Then he smiled down on her.

"I thought I was hidin' that rather well," he said whimsically.

"You are. But I know. Can you tell me, Jim ? "

"I'm wantin' somethin' I can't get. That's all. Leave it there, mother, please."

His direct look carried the boy-honesty yet. But there was a man's pain and a man's passion below.

"Is it best for you to have it, Jim ? "

"I don't know. I want it."

His voice was smothered, and Katherine read the

full meaning into it. But she said no more. She sat on the corn-bin with her arm about Jim's shoulder, and together they stared into the night—silent. Man and woman, they recognised the sacred individuality of the human soul, and they recognised its strength. For, since the first man-child played in the earth-caves, babbling of the days when he, too, should hunt the auroch and bite deep into good and evil, the red blood of those who face the wind and the rain has not thinned nor run slower. Because of some callow man-child whose heart was great while the down was yet on his cheek, the pioneer heroes of men have threshed the sea and conquered the floor-plates and the rafters of earth. They have sinned, but they have sinned greatly; they have loved greatly; they have greatly died. But still the red blood pulses from sire to son, and still the children of the pioneer-breed rebel at the yoke, or yield themselves to it only that it may brace them for a higher heritage. To-night Jim was rebelling—savagely. But he would not tell it.

He laughed, pulled her up, and turned to the door.

"That's all, dear," he said. "Forget it. Oh, mother, there is a new kid on the *Stars and Stripes*. A town kid. Get Nick to bring him up sometimes. He wants mothering."

Over the dead ash of the kitchen fire the brothers talked together with their tongues. But it was in the old low-raftered bedroom that had been theirs years since that their hearts spoke at last to each other.

Nick walked across the room as they entered, and stuck his thumb through a knot-hole in the farther door.

"Jes' fills it now," he said. "Lord, how scared

we uster be o' the moon shinin' through that, Jim. 'Member how we'd sweat away under the bedclothes an' swear to each other that we wasn't mindin' a dump. But we knew that all the giants an' devils o' the earth was out in the garden beyond the knot-hole."

Jim dropped on the bed and pulled his boots off.

"Right enough there were giants an' devils behind it," he said. "We've run up against one or two since then. Haven't we, Nick?"

Nick looked at him with half-shut eyes.

"What are you settlin' down inter a cop for?" he demanded. "You've run wilder through Australia than I have—an' I done plenty o' transplantin'."

"I gave in my name when I was hopin' to marry Roseen Mitchell," said Jim simply. "I've been through the medical exam, an' I hate backin' down on a thing. You know I never saved a brown on the wallaby. But I'd a-done it out o' this—for her."

Nick was silent. Then he kicked away his boots savagely. "Are you wantin' ter pump me?" he demanded.

"Not unless you want to tell, Nickie."

Nick's forehead was knit. All the old power that Jim had exercised over him swept back, full and clean and strong. But there was too much between. He and Jim were travelling to lands far apart, and in the calling across the distance side-winds would carry the voices away and blur the words.

"Guess you wouldn't be int'rusted," he said. "An' I'm dog-tired, anyway. Good-night."

He fell asleep promptly. But Jim lay staring out into the past where Roseen Mitchell's face smiled at him. He had seen that face too often in his inner sight to

forget the turn of the slim neck, or the sheen of the pale gold hair, or the gray, clear eyes with the calm of a saint and the elusive coquetry that touched men's hearts to flame.

"Bless you," he said, underbreath. "Bless your dear heart for ever, my girl. I've no right to kick. But he won't make you happy. Not as I could, Roseen."

And then memory of Soutar caught and tortured him, with the bitterness and the hot passion of his blood to help. But he brought to help also that wide sanity of soul which Nature gives to those who live near her, and that faith in the Eternal Good which can make peace in the desert places. And when night had gone and the pallor of dawn smudged the sky, Katherine came in soft-foot, to find them both sleeping, as she had come so many times in earlier years.

She had lit the kitchen fire and slung the kettle above it. She had cut sandwiches and filled Jim's water-bottle. Then she came, with the love that her work had laid on her face strengthening as she looked down on the two.

"O Lord, have them in keeping," she prayed. "Teach them to stand up straightly to their temptations and their trials. Teach them to face their punishments like men, and to be not cast down in their sorrows. Teach them to live bravely, and to die bravely when their time comes. And give them the manliness to be glad through it all."

Later, Betty heard the ring of feet on the flagged floor, the voices, the laughter, the good-byes. She pulled the quilt round her and climbed to the top

window. Above the hedge of box she saw Jim rein up for a moment at the outer gate and wave his hat.

Then the twist in the track took them, and, being a woman, she slid down on her knees by the bed. But, being also a girl, she did not pray as Katherine had prayed.

“Make him happy,” she said half-fiercely. “Don’t let anything hurt him—ever. Keep him safe always, and make him happy.”

CHAPTER II

“ I FEAR NO FOE IN SHINING ARMOUR ”

THE night was hot and muggy and black ; the air came harsh to the lips with taint of distant bush-fires somewhere in New South Wales, and the full moon hung in the high-drifting smoke, blood-red and big as a Cheddar cheese. Under the willows in the postmaster's garden at Buntree the thermometer registered ninety-something. Down on the *Stars and Stripes*, where the half-stagnant river-water grew green scum and the close bush pressed the hot air into solidity, no man asked what it registered. From his patrol-ground before the winch Barnes suggested once to the Kid that it was a “ snorter.” But the Kid, more than half-stripped and dragging red-hot clinkers from the furnace with a long-handled rake, did not encourage conversation. He sent the last of the clinkers overboard with a curse, cast on more coal, slammed the doors with a force that made Barnes grin, and flung himself down on the pontoon where the lap-lap of water, as the dredge bucked and swayed, gave promise of coolness that did not come.

“ If those b-brutes don't turn up directly,” said the Kid, feeling the quick pant of his heart against his ribs shake his voice into unsteadiness, “ I'll go over there myself. But I'm blest if I'll d-do anything more to that fire to-night.”

He rubbed the sweat from throat and arms with a dirty towel, tossed it aside, and lay down again. The dredge rocked like a fast train on a narrow gauge, and all the noises that it made were peculiarly evil to the Kid to-night. From the groan and grunt of the buckets as they climbed the elevator, from the steady pulse of the engine, from the delirious snarl of the wash rushing down the screen, and the distant splash of tailings, voices spoke to him—jeering at his weariness, his dirt, at the smell of oil and the fouler smell of the dammed river. Poetry and romance in the Kid had gone down under the clumsy boot-heel of reality, and he was not a better man for it. But there was no one to tell him so, and he had not time to find out for himself. He groaned again at the heat, brought up a palmful of thick, smelling water to cool his forehead, and listened for the coming of the next watch.

On the far pontoon, before the winches, Barnes paced silently. He was the solid clay soil that will keep a post upright but cannot grow a tree—until the phosphates and ammonia and other chemicals of the atmosphere are poured into it. The Kid was principally chemicals; and such trees as he grew were of rank growth, and apt to pull out by the roots. He and Barnes were the two opposite poles of the men whom Australia breeds, and in a new land there is danger from either or both of the types.

Through the night came the whine of the “traveller” along the steel rope, and the sound of speech. The Kid stood up, kicked off his overalls, and swung round to greet Nick as he jumped aboard.

“T-the coal’s dam dirty,” he said. “An’ the dredge is kicking like an old s-she-camel. I don’t be-

lieve there's a bally ounce of gold going up either. Thought you were never coming—an' you c-can keep her now you've got her. I wouldn't take the b-bally old thing at a gift."

He stood with legs apart in the flare of the hurricane-lamp. His face was smudged with sweat and coal-smoke; his light, rough hair was streaked with it, and his blue eyes showed flame in his cross young face. Jack West passed between the two, crossed to the engine, and stopped it. And, in the silence that fell like a blow, Nick laughed.

"You've dammed the river this season an' last," he said. "Now I s'pose you think you've a right to damn the whole caboodle. I told yer you wouldn't stan' much o' this game in the summer." Then he laughed again. "Gosh! you do look a trick. An' the Gov'ment was hopin' to git a White Australia."

"S-shut up," said the Kid hotly. "You're always chiacking me about not standing things. Look here," he thrust out his blackened hands, where the nails were broken to the quick and callosities showed on the palms; "did I cry off when those used to b-bleed at the shovelling? You know blamed well that I didn't."

"You cried out, though," suggested Nick, cradling his hand over the new-lit flame in his pipe-bowl.

Then the pipe was struck sideways from his teeth, and the Kid's purple, panting, perspiring weight was on top of him. This speech hurt the Kid in his tenderest place; for he had not forgotten the night Jack West and Nick found him up-river, huddled behind a clump of gidya and sobbing himself weak over his raw blisters.

Nick shook him off, caught him by both wrists, and

held him. And behind the smile in his eyes there was something unpleasant.

"None o' that," he said sharply. Then he glanced at Jack West, and laughed again. "You little sausage," he said. "You're the kind we buy twenty on a string down in town. What did you think you were goin' to do, eh? Now, ring it off. I've brought you over a bottle o' beer. I thought you'd be too dry to talk, but that was an error."

"I've made t-tea three times," said the Kid eagerly. "But beer's cooler. Thanks, Nick."

Nick watched as he wiped the mouth of the bottle and drank. Jack West said something in a low tone, and Nick nodded.

"All right," he said. "See here, young 'un; you've got a week off from to-morrow. Joe Meares takes your place. The boss told me just now."

The Kid dropped on a half-filled coal-sack and stared.

"What for?" he demanded.

"You're wanted up at Coodye, where Saltire is holding a court of inquiry, day after next. An' you'll come back wi' Jim—wi' Mounted Constable Kyneton—if you're not locked up in clink on a charge of murder."

"Rot," said the Kid tersely, and Jack West grinned.

"He doesn't go round now holding out his leg to get it pulled, do you, Kid? It's all right. A nice little outing for you, just because you happened to be the last man to see Dan Pearce alive. An' you'll come back with Jim. You're rather struck on Jim, arn't you? Wise Kid. It's always well to get on the soft side of a trap."

The dark blood rushed to Nick's forehead.

"You leave old Jim alone," he said. "He won't

have any soft sides when he's on duty. You know I told you not to expect it, Jack."

Jack West shrugged his shoulders.

"Who's wanting him to? Don't be a dithering idiot, Nick. Kid, there's Barnes calling you for the fortieth time. Now, git. He may have the patience of a church-window full of saints, but I guess he wants his sleep."

In the boat the Kid sat still, chewing his nails. The soft dark and the river were less hot than the noisy, lighted dredge, and Barnes and Jack West talked in murmurs as the punt ploughed landward in obedience to the squeal overhead. The beer had muddled the Kid's jangled nerves, and for the first time in many weeks Jim's words, spoken to him on that black night in Saltire's room, came back to him. He grinned, coming to his feet unsteadily as Jack West reversed the sheer and the punt homed to her bearings against the brushing scrub of the bank.

"L-look here," he cried, snatching at the outline of a shoulder where the men swayed to the rock of the punt. "Tell Nick there are worse f'flows than him on the river, an' I ne-never knuckled down to one of 'em. N-never. That's me. Tell him."

Jack West caught the Kid by the scruff of the neck and ran him ashore.

"Oh, yes; you're just the chap," he said suavely. "Keep on the river side o' him going home, Barnes."

"Tell him," said the Kid, with awful dignity, "tell him that J-Jim said I couldn't run with him—not with Jim. T'other fellow. Look here; I took him—t'other f'low down at two-up th'other day. What price that, eh?"

Jack West was grinning in the dark. He had no home, no people, no history that any man knew. But the lawless, uncaring, unfearing blood in him had drawn him to the like in Nick and had kept him there.

"Seven-an'-a-penny-half-penny," he said. "I was t'other fellow. So Jim warned you, did he? Won't he be glad to see what a good boy you've been?"

"I'm a ma-an," said the Kid, beginning very loudly and ending in a sob. "This bank's got the hiccoughs. Well, what's it going up'n down for? Yes, I'll give you a hand, Barnes. Two f'you like. Oh, it's a long way home."

For a moment Jack West stood unmoving in the punt, watching the black block of the two men fade into the thick shadows among the gum-trees. He was smoothing his little moustache with a slow hand.

"If Jim Kyneton takes it into his head to fight us for that young fool," he said, "he can't get him. We've got to have the whole boiling ourselves. And we can't risk a row with Jim. I've seen him up against some pretty tough propositions before now. But I haven't seen him bested. And I don't know if Nick wouldn't go back on me sooner than on his blooming brother if it comes to 'Pull devil, pull baker.' We-ell——"

He clicked the traveller in motion and surged back to the dredge, and the half-whistle on his lips shaped into words.

"I fear no foe in shining ar-mour,"

he sang; and the Kid, stumbling along the dark track, lifted up his voice in cheerful, incoherent answer.

"I know that," he said. "I know . . . shinin' armour. T-that's Jim. He'll be wearing a shiny meat-cover on his head. I'll tell him . . . t-tell him that."

But the Kid had forgotten it all when he rode into Coodye through the red heat of the next evening and saw Jim on the curb before the "Fox and Dingo" with a half-dozen men about him. Jim heard the clatter of hoofs on the native flint of the street, and he looked over Hack Ellis's shoulder. Then the laughter-wrinkles creased up round his eyes.

"Who's that sucker?" he demanded.

It was told for solemn truth in Buntree that the Kid habitually trotted in the saddle whilst his horse walked, and also—this was Jack West's addenda—until he had crossed the leather he was uncertain which way he was going to face. But no man called the Kid a coward.

He came down the street at a hand-gallop, one stirrup loose and both legs beating the saddle-flaps. His mare's head was up, and he sawed a rein in each hand, bringing her over to the water-trough with a swerve that jumped Jim's heart to his mouth. Hack bit off his talk with an oath.

"You near crossed her legs there, you young ass," he said roughly. "Are yer aimin' for Dead Finish yet?"

"You g-go an' play," said the Kid, tumbling off and hitching the reins. "I'd have hit it if I had been. Hallo, Jim. C-come and have a wet. I—I—you remember me, don't you?"

The sudden boyish stammer jarred Jim's memory awake. He looked down on the browned, burned young face where the smudge of a moustache lay faint, and, meeting the blue eyes, he knew the Kid again. He was to see more in those blue eyes before he and Life had done with them, and a vague foreshadow of the knowledge stirred in him.

“ Yes,” he said slowly. “ I remember. Are you still on the *Stars and Stripes*? ”

The Kid nodded. He felt the blood rush to his skin before Jim’s steady eyes, and something of his swagger died out of him. That quick-born admiration of a year past which Jim of the Ranges had waked in him came again, bringing a sudden shyness and respect.

Physical drill, and rigorous training, and many things more had changed Jim. The suggestion of flow in the muscles, of reserve power, of soul-kindliness were there still. But more watchful alertness showed in his poise, more stern control in the face, more temperamental calm in the clear eyes. He would be a good tool for Saltire to work with, a tool that would not easily buckle or break. For Jim had suffered more than many when he submitted himself to all the ropes and chains and bits of packthread which hamper a man who comes to train with men in the bulk. He broke the packthread more than twice, and he galled himself on the chains, and he pulled the rope-hitches tighter by unwary turns. For all his days he had known the long following winds blown from heated inlands or sweeping seas ; all his days he had known the calling of birds in the bush and the far rippling lines of horizon ; all his days he had known the careless freedom of a man who goes where his heart pulls him, by right of his hand and his brain and his tongue.

Then the discipline of the Police Depot came to clip the hawk’s wings, and to bind jesses about his feet, and to knot the hood over his eyes, and Jim shook himself free from that discipline with all his clean, eager soul turning homeward to the ranges and the open sky again. He had learned lessons that he would not forget,

and the men who came under his hand knew him for flint or for tender human man as the need might lie. But the Kid, looking at him in the scarlet flare of sunset, understood that he was Jim of the Ranges still.

“C-come on,” said the Kid, pushing through the bar-door. “Come an’ blow the froth off a pint o’ beer, Jim. Right-o, Hack ; I’m coming . . .”

After him noisy boots clattered and stilled. Talk and laughter woke in the bar. Jim thrust his hands in his breeches-pockets and strolled down the sidewalk to the shade of a Murray pine. The slip of rough shingle under his feet was good after the Melbourne streets ; the smell of dry, hot bush and pungent gum-leaves was good after the petrol and the bananas and the fish-barrows on Prince’s Bridge. Down a grassed side-road a couple of children were tailing cows. The girl had her skirt drawn over her head, and her slim ankles showed white in the red dust. The boy crawled slowly, hacking at a stick, and his whistle fell away sweetly to meet with the whistling of the magpies back in the tall messmates.

Jim’s eyes filled with content. He was coming back to take a harder place among the men that he knew. But he did not fear that. Peace was over the world ; peace, and the wide sky, and God’s own earth and moon and stars.

The sun was a blood-shot eyeball low in the smoky, hazy sky, and man’s eyeball could meet it, unaching. It dropped suddenly behind a round hill scattered over with sparse gums as a bald man’s head is scattered with hairs, and down at the hotel a slovenly girl swung a cow-bell in the little passage that smelt of onions and stale beer. Jim plunged in among the crowding

shoulders as the men went down to the dingy dining-room, and his heart was high in him. The unregenerate spirit that knows neither discipline nor order was awake at touch of the old sights and old sounds.

The Kid dropped into a chair beside him. Since Jim saw him last he had blown the froth from more than one pint of beer, and his light hair was tousled and his waistcoat unbuttoned. He grinned at Jim through the steam that rose thick from the hot meats and vegetables.

"This is great," he said. "Great. A week off just b-because old Dan Pearce chose to slip his wind. Lord ! it's hot in here. D'you think that girl down at the far end'd mind if I took off my coat ? I c-can't stand this."

"Probably she wouldn't notice it," said Jim.

The Kid straightened, laying his knife and fork down.

"Wouldn't she ? *Wouldn't* she ? What'll you bet ? S-she's been staring at me ever since we sat down. No . . . by gum ; it's you she's looking at." He went into a fit of laughter. "That's one in the eye for Samuel," he said. "Well, you c-can have it, Jim. You are a damned good-looking chap, you know."

"Have some cabbage," suggested Jim, struggling between laughter and a rising irritation.

"T-thanks. Yes, you are, right enough. I knew it first t-time I saw you. What's that, Charlie ?" The Kid leaned forward, raising his voice. "Yes," he said. "Of course I've seen him before. He was bathin' in a creek——"

"Shut up," said Jim sharply ; for down the table the conversation broke up to catch the high, assertive

voice, and the slovenly girl was reaching over his shoulder to brush the flies off the sugar-bowl.

“Shut up yourself. You weren’t any worse than the s-statues I’ve seen in some art galleries——”

The explosion of laughter brought the grin to Jim’s lips. But the Kid felt the firm hand on his shoulder, and the low, steady voice that seemed to touch on his heated brain.

“I’ve told you once,” said Jim. “I’m not goin’ to say it again, for you’ll shut up when you’re told. D’you hear?”

The Kid sat unmoving for a moment. Then he shook himself like a wet dog, reached for his cup of hot tea, and gulped it. Then he turned to Jim.

“I b-beg your pardon,” he said. “It was so infernally hot to-day. Gone to my head, I s’pose.”

He fell to his meal again, and Jim leaned back, watching the faces of bagman and greasy Chinaman and rough-bearded splitter, where the light from the dull lamps shook over them and the spirals of steam rose damply. The hoarse talk, flickering back and forth through the clatter of knives and forks on china, was the talk of other days. The talk of the drover, of the miner, of the rider, and of the man who has run with all these. Then he dropped into it, choosing his men, and setting aside familiarity with a quiet ease that roused respect in the Kid again. He halted for a moment in his quarrel with a couple of bagmen over the merits of Harris’s Harness-Paste and “The Little Gem” oil-stove.

“I-if I was getting a bit gay . . . ’pologise, you know. I want to be friends with you. You’re Nick’s brother—he calls you h-his brother, and I’m rather

shook on Nick. Shook on you too, you know. Wi-will you be friend o' mine, hey ? "

Always Jim lent himself out to men. He loved his kind with the wide, healthy soul of him, and he gave again and over again when they called. But already he saw the deeper thing that lay behind the Kid's rambling words. Nick was doing this ; Nick, who was dear to him as his blood brother, and it would be with Nick that the hot, fierce reckoning must come if he interfered. More than once he had seen the end of a man who would run knee to knee with Nick.

Then he looked into the Kid's eager blue eyes.

" We'll come up on the hill for a smoke and a pipe after tea," he said. " Then I'll tell you."

But after tea the Kid was missing. Rumour said that he was washing up with the kitchen-girls. So Jim climbed the hill with Hack, and lay flat on the gum-leaves, and sucked at his old clay pipe until the tender greens and daffodils of the sky quivered to dark, and a little breeze began to run, whispering, through the rustling scrub. Overhead the star-lamps swung out, big and golden, and Jim withdrew his eyes from them to the dull, unsteady light that human hands had lit before the hotel-bar. He stood up.

" Guess I'd better go down an' give a look to that Kid," he said. " He was gettin' ready to raise Cain if he got half a show."

Hack looked up at the big, easy body, and the square chin, and the direct-gazing eyes. This was a man who would stamp out evil unhesitatingly, but it was also a man who would find pain in the doing of it.

" Nick and Jack West have got a lien on that there Kid," he remarked. " They're workin' a cross game

somewheres, Jim. He ain't the first sucker they've got a-holt on."

The words hit Jim like a blow. He took his breath sharply.

"I'll believe anythin' you like o' Jack West," he said. "But I won't believe Nick's crooked. He's wild, tearin' wild. But I've always known him straight."

Hack spat down-hill.

"That for Jack West," he said. "He's a twicer, an' that's the best you can say o' him. Come on, then, Jim. I heard horses passin' a while back."

"It was fellows drovin' cattle," said Jim. "There isn't anythin' on earth like the clickin' o' cattle-hoofs. You an' me know that, Hack. My soul, we've had days to remember, ain't we?"

"I think," said Hack, picking himself up. "Race yer down, Jim. I want ter see ef yer trainin's lef' any tallow on ter yer."

The boyhood was quick in Jim as he came into the lighted bar with Hack on his heels. The room was full with the men of the township and the men who had ridden in with the cattle, and the heat of it struck on skins cooled by the outer air like a puff from a furnace-door. Near the bar sounded a high, assertive voice that brought Jim plunging through the crowd with the shadow of anxiety in his eyes.

"I'm not goin' to make myself wet-nurse to that kid," he told himself. "But I think it'll be about up to me to give him a licking before long. And what sort of evidence does he imagine he'll be fit to give in the morning?"

But the shrill boy-voice was broken by the boom as of a big sea on the reefs, and Jim followed the sound up

to the counter where a great drover thumped with a hairy fist until the glasses jumped. The dust of the track was heavy on the broad shoulders and the spread of the black beard, and the unbuttoned shirt lay away from a hairy throat.

“Here y’ are, mates,” he shouted. “Here y’ are. Who’s callin’ Tom Ryan dry meat? Why-y . . . Jim! Glory, Jim, it’s good ter see your chivvy again. Put it there . . . Lord! son, you’ve learned a grip since fust I met up wi’ you. What are yer,takin’, Jim? Call yer mate. I’m shoutin’ this crowd. Shandy? My oath! You’re not puttin’ in a peg yet, are yer? Well, here’s a thousand a year. My-y oath. I thought I’d never git wet agin.”

Jim leaned on the bar with the blood humming in his ears, and his eyes showing a hunger for the past that he had not known was in him. Among the other men sifted the huge drovers, with the red flame of a northern summer yet in their faces and their speech. For they had come so late from the fierce, great plains where the drought-tortured earth spawns up torture and passions and temptations for men to make their own.

Jim’s senses went out to meet and understand in a strong flood. He, too, had ridden their tracks by sandy desert, and salt-bush plain, and desolate, barren gully. He, too, knew the call of the black crows that flap out from the splintered rocks where a thing lies dead. He, too, knew the kangaroo pad where the brutes hop to water in a silent line, one behind the other as Chinamen go; and he, too, knew the smell of hot horses when the long grass is close and smothering above the rider’s head, and the quick, gay jingle of their bridles as the tang of water blows down-wind.

He pushed his glass back to the barman.

“Have another?” he said. “Only soda for me, Jerry. An’ so the old North Country’s there yet, Tom? Coolin’ down any, eh?”

“Coolin’ down? A square hinch of it’d break up the South Pole, would that same flamin’ old Queensland. I’ve slung her up. Guv her the go, the ole jade. Put me in my bunk fer a month wi’ the fever, an’ then topped it up wi’ sandy blight. That’s what she did ter me. I ain’t goin’ back. I’m goin’ acrost ter New Zealand. They ain’t got any bad diseases there ’cept taxes, an’ I don’t come under any special headin’. Tell yer what, Jim; you come along wi’ me. You was allers a good mate o’ mine—never struck a better.”

“I’m booked,” said Jim, and felt afraid at the sudden glow of rebellion that waked in his heart.

“Booked?” Ryan brought his gaze from the soft shirt and tweed coat to the breeches and tops. Then he slammed his glass down.

“I heered of it,” he said. “I heered of it. But I’d a-held it for a lie till the cows come home. You! You what never was bossed by anybody but yerself since I’ve knowed yer. *You!* What in the nation did yer do it for, Jim?”

Jim winced. That wound was not callous yet. He met the heat-seared eyes with his own honest ones.

“Not altogether for fun,” he said. “That’s all right. I’m standin’ the racket, Tom. What’s that?”

He wheeled at a disturbance in the crowd behind him, and Soutar pushed through, partly drunk and entirely friendly.

“J-Jim, ole mate,” he cried, reaching for Jim’s hand. “It’s doin’ my eyes good ter see yer again——”

Jim drew back. Loathing for this man whom Roseen had chosen before himself rose in him. But it was not well that Soutar should know it.

“That’s all right,” he drawled. “I reckon they want doin’ some good to. No hurry. Keep on lookin’. How many o’ me are you seein’ jus’ now, Soutar ? ”

The tone was innocent as a baby’s. The crowd closed into a ring about the two, and their appreciation woke Soutar’s understanding. He straightened himself and glared.

“If you was meanin’ that for a insult——” he began.

“Because,” continued Jim, looking down on him sideways, “a butterfly has somethin’ like sixteen hundred facets to its eyes, an’ a motor-car has only one. An’ as they’re the only two things I’ve ever seen that stick out like your eyes do——”

“By cripes ! Call me names, would you ! ”

“I can’t be dead sure if you’re a motor-car or a butterfly. You’ve got the noise an’ the gen’ral behaviour of a motor-car——”

“W-wait till I git—git at yer,” stuttered Soutar, backing against the cordon that held him fast. “I’ll show yer, yer——”

“An’, as it’s one o’ the most offensive things I know, we’ll lay odds that you are a motor-car. But a man’s apt to put his heel on a butterfly if it gits in his way, you know.”

The slow, unaltering tone, backed by the steady eyes, the delicate suggestion of punishment in the last words, had weight with Soutar. He brought out a twisted smile from somewhere.

“Aw ri’, aw ri’, mate. Ne’er mind. Come an’ liquor up. What’s yer fancy ? ”

Jim turned on his heel. He was angry with himself because he wanted to strike Soutar. But he was more angry with Soutar for refusing to answer to the goad.

"Not you," he said. "An' when I was your mate I must have been sleep-walkin', for I don't remember it."

He thrust out to the passage, still seeking the Kid. A candle guttered in its socket on the wall, and farther down sounded the click of billiard-balls and the occasional growl of the marker. Jim went in with quick steps, and the man stooping over the table flung down his cue.

"Can't hit a thing for sour apples," he said. "Come an' have a knock-up with Baynes, Jim."

Jim had played on that cloth before. Besides, he wanted the Kid. He said so, and the man shook his head.

"Dunno. He's lookin' for trouble somewhere. I spotted that at first sight . . . there y' are. Ain't that him performin' now?"

In the bar the shuffle of boots, and the clink of glasses, and the rise and fall of rough, good-humoured talk sounded like the murmur of an incoming sea. A high voice cut the murmur with the jagged vividness of lightning.

"That's a lie! A damned lie! C-come an' prove it then, if you're game."

Jim made three steps up the passage, hearing the answer as he came.

"Garn, yer little red 'errin'. I've put away your sort by the hundred an' never knowed it."

From the door, above the moving heads, Jim saw the Kid by the bar—white-faced and blazing in the eyes, with shoulders braced and hands stiff by his sides.

Tom Ryan swayed opposite, broadly humorous and massive as a bibulous Neptune might be. By the Kid's arm showed Soutar, with slinking fear in his shifty eyes and lean face, and Jim's heart turned to flint. He slid through the crush with the unhasty swiftness of a snake.

"That's a couple o' my mates goin' to chew each other," he explained. "Thanks . . . yes, Puddy, I'm passin'. All right. Now, boys, what's the name o' the tune, eh?"

The Kid flashed round on him like the curl of a whip-lash.

"You keep out o' this," he said. "This blank blank waster s-says Soutar was tossing with a double-headed penny. I've worked with Soutar six months, an' I say it's a lie. K-keep out o'this, I tell you. By ——! if he doesn't take it back I'll knock the face off him."

"You ignerant little pup! Why, I cud rip yer up wi' my thumb easy as shellin' peas if I was wantin' it. Jim . . . now, Jim, yer needn't come messin' inter this, need yer? Ah, I knowed them pants'd spile yer. Can't yer forgit 'em fur a while an' let's converse comfortable? I was talkin' wi' Soutar; but this kid seemed ter cotton ter me, someways."

Big Ryan reached forward, swung the Kid aside by the collar, and faced Soutar.

"Ef yer don't turn out them pockets o' yourn, I'll p'raps be standin' yer on yer 'ead d'reckly," he said mildly. "I acts Lib'ral an' I votes Lib'ral; but, when a man tries ter come the fandango on me wi' a double-headed penny, I likes ter do my actin' Lib'ral on that man's face. Now, ef you're quite ready, Mister Soutar——"

The Kid writhed in Jim's grip, and Jim's heart was

sickened. How far had Nick led this boy's feet on the track to perdition that he should make a friend of such as Soutar ?

"Shut up," he said, and shook the shoulder he held. "You're out o' this, and so am I just now. And I'm not goin' in if I can help it. Let Soutar clear himself if he can."

There was more than one in the room hoped that Soutar could not. Vaguely Jim was praying for it. For sake of Roseen, for sake of the boy, for sake of all the evil that Soutar had done he wanted this shame sheeted home before his fellows. But he did not mean to interfere so long as the elasticity of the law allowed him to stand aside.

Soutar wet his dry lips with his tongue.

"I tell you I didn't," he said. "You let me go. I'll have yer up fur assault if yer touches me. There's another trap in the township 'sides that sneerin' brute over there."

Back in the crowd some one shouted, and some one else raised the "pip-pip-pip" of a motor-horn. This brought full approval and a volley of gay advice :

"Bail him up, Jim. Take his number. He's above reg'lation speed."

"Tom ! Tom ! Back him 'fore he runs over us. Pip ! Pip ! Pip !"

Jim swung round with his hand up.

"I say, mates," he said. "Give the fellow a show. We're not a beastly town-push up here, are we ?"

The genial voice and face laid the noise as surely as a summer downpour lays dust. The men grunted and shuffled nearer, with silent tongues, and the Kid loosed his fury into the quiet.

“ Believe his word, can’t you ? Oh, you r-rotters ! If you’re *men*, can’t you believe a man’s word ! ”

Jim twisted the Kid to him ; and the lazy ease was gone from voice and manner.

“ That’s enough,” he said curtly. “ You’re drunk. Hold your tongue.”

But through his disgust ran a thread of appreciation for this boy who stood up gallantly for the creed of mateship which the outer rim of the Empire knows full well.

Soutar was glancing right and left at the faces that hemmed him in. Big Tom Ryan lurched forward.

“ Put yer ’ands up,” he said. “ I’m not goin’ ter have any little palmin’ games here. I saw that double-headed penny go inter yer lef’ trouser-pocket, an’ I’m goin’ ter take it out. Put ’em up ; fur ef I goes prospectin’ in gen’ral I’ll p’raps fin’ more’n double-headed pennies.”

Jim watched with brows drawn down and breath coming sharply through his lips. For a year past he had smothered the memory of Roseen beneath his daily duties, tramping it down as a man tramps wool in a press. But, even as wool, it had risen again until the heavy screw of Time, descending on it, crushed it lower and yet lower in his heart. Now, sight of Soutar had loosed the screw, and he knew that he loved Roseen dearly as he had loved her ever. But Soutar was her choice ; Soutar, with the mean yellow face and the eyes that never fully met another man’s eyes ; Soutar, and not himself whom men called Jim of the Ranges.

“ Put yer hands up—quick ! ”

The last word came with the roar of a bull, and Soutar’s hands went up. Even in that instant Jim

noted the tremble of them and the dirt in the bitten nails. Ryan thrust his hand deep in the man's pocket, brought out a handful of small cash, turned it over with a finger-tip, and picked out a coin.

"Here y' are, gen'men," he cried, and flung his arm up. "Here y' are. His Majesty King Ed'ard wi' two 'eads ter him. Two bloomin' 'eads, like a freak in a side-show. Bah! You twicer!"

He threw the handful of change in Soutar's face and turned on his heel. And then the Kid went suddenly mad. Drink and the heat of the room had overset his senses and his heart, and his natural chivalry brought him to defend the loser.

"Don't believe him! He had it in his own hand all the t-time!"

Jim moved just at the possible moment. The movement brought him between the Kid and Ryan, and he grinned at Ryan.

"It's all right, Tom," he said. "The young fool's drunk."

But the little red pig-eyes gave no glint of laughter back. And the thickened voice told Jim more than the words. Wrath was making Big Ryan more drunk than any whisky ever distilled.

"You git out o' the daylight a minit, Jim," he said.

"You did!" bellowed the Kid. "You did! You did! You——"

The room held its breath. Jim felt an insane desire to laugh. The Kid's fair head of curls and his hairless boy-face gave the lie so sharply to his words and to the flame in his blue eyes.

! Ryan bore Jim's shoulder down with a heavy, beefy hand, and his voice was harsher.

"You lend me that little blanky sucker fur a half-a-minit, Jim. I'm goin' ter stiffen him. He's called me what I aren't takin' from the Queen on 'er throne—no, ner her ladies-in-waitin', neither."

"Can't," said Jim cheerfully. "He's drunk. Try me if you want some one, Tom."

"You len' me that kid——"

"I won't. What'd you do wi' him, anyway? He's not big enough to hit."

"I am," howled the Kid.

He doubled round Jim, dodged from the reaching hands, and shot free of his coat.

"Come on, you!" he shouted, and leapt at the big drover like a native cat.

Then the men watching saw two things happen in the blink of an eyelid. Big Ryan caught the Kid by belt and chin, forcing the slight body back in a sudden surge of uncurbed fury. And, even as the men knew that they saw, Jim dropped on the two by a swift, cat-like pounce, the Kid came among the glasses on the bar with the jerk of a stone from a catapult, and the drover rolled on the floor, shrieking oaths and prayers in a flood. Jim's knee was in the middle of his back, and his right arm was out-flung and twisted under Jim's grip.

"Steady," said Jim, and his voice was raised. "Steady, man. The bone will snap if you move, and we haven't a vet handy. Now . . . got anythin' to say?"

The fall and the pain had sobered Big Ryan. He screwed his head round until his eyes met Jim's. Then he grinned.

"Jim, you bloomin' delight" he said. "Who

learned yer that trick ? My oath ; ef anybody'd telled me as yer cud a-downed me that easy I'd a-sent him ter sleep fur a week. What are yer done, eh ? ”

“ It's part of my training,” explained Jim. “ Can I let you up ? Will you leave the Kid alone, Tom ? ”

“ The Kid ? He'll hev bunked.”

Jim cast a glance at the Kid, where Hack and Sid Taylor held him.

“ Not much he hasn't. He's waitin' to eat you up. Will you leave him alone ? ”

“ Ain't got much choice, are I ? ”

“ Not much.”

“ Well . . . leggo, then. You can have him. Lor' luv me, an' you've downed me ! Let's look at yer.”

He heaved his giant bulk upward, rubbed his arm, wincing, and stared at Jim.

“ Ain't even made yer blow. Well, I'm blest. There ain't no spare meat on *you*. An' I've seed gels as didn't move so pretty. Look here, Jim ; you learn me that little trick. I cud do with it proper.”

Jim ran his glance over the burly body, over the broad chest, and the bull-neck, and the genial eyes set in the hairy face.

“ Not for Joe,” he said. “ You'd kill a regiment dead if I did. Lend a hand, Hack. I'll take this young fire-eater along to bed.”

Intoxication, and heat of body and mind, had gripped the Kid fast. He smiled amiably when Jim brought him up the stair, picked his clothes from him with skill, and dropped him on the stretcher.

“ J-Jim o' th' Ranges,” he said, opening one eyelid. “ Jim. B-b-but you can't cut a beast out o' Nick's mob. Ja-Jack West—t'other f'low said—said——”

His voice trailed into sleep, and Hack grunted, swinging the door.

"He was a bloated mother's darlin' when he fust come up here," he said, and there was pity mixed with the scoff in his speech.

Then he saw Jim's mouth pucker to a grin as he stooped to blow out the candle.

"He'll be somethin' better 'fore I've done with him. The little beggar's full o' grit. You can git, thanks, Hack. I'm comin' directly."

But he did not follow Hack's boots down the noisy stair. In the greenish-white of the moonlight that swam through the naked window he turned back to the bed and looked down on the young puffed face.

The mettle of coming manhood showed there, with the fainter traces of pure childhood. But both were blurred by a coarser touch, and the breath came stutteringly between the open lips. The Kid had tried to run with Nick, and, even as Jim had known, the pace was too fast to hold.

"He's all right yet," said Jim. "If I can get a halter on. But . . . I don't know . . ."

Then he forgot the snoring boy; forgot the little room, with the dirty paper peeling off the walls and the window propped by a stick. Heart and mind and soul had gone out to his foster-brother, whom he loved as he did not love Roseen. He knew Nick. He knew the daring, jolly laugh that went with his sinning, and the sharp, hot temper, and the savage revolt at control. But he knew, too, the strong bond that grappled Nick's heart to his. For the love of a man for a man passes the love of women. It is bred and nurtured in a fiercer, harsher soil, and the spade at the root will not

kill it, nor the red fire of passion, nor the frost of neglect. When a man loves a man truly there is one blight only will wither that love. And it was a blight that neither of the brothers knew yet.

Jim stared on the Kid with the slow humour dawning again in his eyes.

“ You little sinner,” he said. “ If old Nick an’ me are goin’ to have our first row over you I’ll take it out o’ your skin, an’ don’t you forget it. Shook on both of us, are you ? My son, you’re goin’ to be shook by both of us ’fore long, if straws are showin’ the way the wind blows.”

He flung back his shoulders and turned to the door. Behind him the Kid gurgled peacefully in his sleep. From below sounded the wheeze of an accordeon and the rasp of heavy boots dancing on the verandah. Jim halted a moment on the sill.

“ It takes a man to let himself out to the devil entirely,” he said. “ And the Kid hasn’t shed his milk-teeth yet. But Nick’s got his canines all right. I guess it’s about time I began to see a bit more o’ him.”

CHAPTER III

BACK TO THE RANGES

THE wind was champagne, uncorked by electricity. It was the wind of early summer, racing across the ranges to fling its heat-charged message to every live rock-height and every curve of lonely bush. The feet of it ruffled a brown creek sliding down the northern watershed, and the breath of it blew scent from the rich rotten earth and the Cootamundra wattle, and from the honeysuckle and all the thousand bush roots and flowers. All up and down the distance blackbutt and messmate and slim native holly were clucking their leaves as a thirsty man clucks his tongue, and a ripple ran unending through silver gleam of wattles and stiffer dark waves of blackwood and belar to die in the sun-bleached crests of the gums.

And through the scents and the glory of the summer Jim was riding back once again to Buntree.

Beside him the Kid whistled gaily, in notes rollicking, bird-clear, as the magpie-carol, or low and tender as the twitter of a yellow robin singing back in the dim bush. Jim glanced at him. Then he grinned.

“Your evidence got an innocent man out o’ trouble,” he said. “But you couldn’t help that, you know. Don’t go climbin’ up your own back too much, or you’ll overreach. A man can’t anti-up those sort o’ goods every day.”

"Don't want to," said the Kid airily. "I t-ried to be a saint once l-long ago. G-good works, an' all t-that sort of thing. But I've chucked it—along w-with the Sunday school and those c-capers. Lord! I used to be a r-rummy kind of a beggar once."

"You were," said Jim dryly. "You didn't get drunk, and you didn't fight, and you didn't swear when I first met you a year ago."

The Kid answered the tone hotly.

"Every man does that. You know he does."

"Does he?" The quiver round Jim's lips was a half-smile. "I've thought myself something of a man these ten years, an' I don't know that I ever found it necessary to git drunk."

"Nick does. And they all say he's a man," said the Kid defiantly.

Jim winced. He knew by whom the Kid's reckless feet were being led, and he knew where lay his part in it all.

"Do you have much to do wi' Nick these days?" he asked.

"Lots. And h-he's a good sort. He and Jack West let me go round with them most e-every S-Sunday."

"Has he ever taken you down to see my folk at Buntree?"

"N-no."

Jim brushed a fly from his knee in silence. What was Nick wanting of the Kid that he kept Katherine's influence apart? In the days just coming there would be that to unravel, along with all the other snarls. Then he looked on the bush again, and serenity came back. For there was that spirit in him which finds delight in the flick of light across a stone, in the flutter

of a leaf as it falls, in the sway-back of a head of nodding grass when a butterfly launches off from it.

"I'd forgot," he said presently. "I thought I'd never forgot anything about the bush. But I'd forgot even how the mistletoe looks just exactly like a dab of rust on a knife-blade when the sun is shinin' bright on the blue-gums."

The Kid glanced at the reddish lump on the steel-gray breast of a close-leaved gum. Then he glanced at Jim, riding loose in the saddle, with his little hill-bred mare mincing under him and white smoke curling round his head. And for the moment he doubted if this new, coarse life that he was living among men was quite truly the way to real manhood.

Jim was billeted at Dik Dik, ten rough miles from Buntree. But his way there lay down the old trails, and the old familiar landmarks laid their salve on his soul as he passed. In many ways the past year of control had galled him. In many ways the evil of the town had seared and troubled him. But that was over and dead, and he was back to his own again. He realised this in sudden gasps of understanding, as a half-drowned man might realise when he is brought suddenly back to the glory of life once more. He reached out and crushed up the gum-leaves in his hands, inhaling their scent with deep breaths.

"Clean," he said. "My word; they're clean-smellin'. Oh, I am glad to be back."

He knew it more when the night came, and they camped among the scrub and the iron-barks and the slighter gums, when the Kid slept and the bush spoke to him, as long ago, in voices and sounds and scents that other men did not heed. He trod away from the dead

camp-fire into the dusk. Then he stood very still, listening, as the dark deepened. And the life of a thousand thousand hidden creatures, moving even now about him, held his spirit in a strong understanding companionship that would not break whilst he lived. Faint chirp and twitter wooed him from the denser bush; the rasping slide of a snake and the following sharp squeak of a kangaroo-mouse told where Life and Death had gripped hands, and, out of the tense hush woke, slowly, steadily, all the million noises of the night when the night-things go seeking, with meetings and partings, and with mystery set in their silent feet.

Jim was alive to the last quivering fibres of him.

“The river, an’ the bush, an’ the ranges—an’ Nick,” he said. Then his eyes clouded. “If Nick is goin’ wrong as Saltire says—but I won’t believe that. Nick’s wild as the ranges. He belongs to them true. But he is straight. And the Lord send he keeps straight. But—why is he playin’ the deuce wi’ the Kid?”

Long since Nick had laughed at Jim’s deep-rooted serenity, saying:

“I wonder what yer’d be like wi’ all yer underpinnin’ loosed an’ a strong wind sweepin’ down on yer, Jim,” and Jim had laughed also, answering: “I’ll worry about that when it comes.” But the first nut was unscrewed in that underpinning at the next daybreak, when Hack met them on the slopes above Buntree and rode down with them into the township.

Hack told many things. But one of the first brought blood.

“Yer knowed as Mitchell was dead, an’ Mrs. M. took the ‘Bushman’s Rest’ up at Dik Dik, didn’t yer, Jim?” he said. “We’re hopin’ as she’ll make a decenter pub

out of it than ever Watkins did. No fear but what the boys'll roll up quick an' lively so long as Roseen is around. There's lots of 'em thinks the world an' all on her. Can't say as I care for the whiny sort myself."

Jim stared straight ahead. Through the sunlight, through the distant veils of blue, Roseen's face smiled out on him.

"No," he said slowly. "No, Hack, I hadn't heard of it."

"There's some fellers say as she'll be givin' Soutar the go before long," pursued Hack. "He ain't got none o' the rhino, an' she ain't the sort ter marry fer love. Did yer hear as him an' Mrs. M. has rows reglar, too?"

"No," said Jim again. "No, I hadn't heard."

He spoke no more until they rounded a knoll of earth shot with glistening out-crops. Here a long slit in the rock gaped at them with fringes of fern overhanging like a ragged moustache. Jim pulled up and said curtly :

"Don't move, you two. I want to see if there are any tracks."

He passed down the mouth of the cave and back. The Kid shivered involuntarily. In the easy lope and the keen eyes there was suggestion of a dingo or of a seeking wolf on the trail.

"W-what did you expect to f-find?" he demanded.

Jim shook his head, climbing back to the saddle. His eyes were somewhat puzzled.

"That's Saltire's business—and mine," he said. But a very little while later it became the Kid's business also.

The trail brought them down within two miles of the old stone house; within one mile; within sixty

yards. But Jim's mind had not turned back to the two women waiting him there, and it was Betty only, laid by the heels with a twisted ankle, who sat in the verandah and rehearsed the first words when they should meet.

And her first words were incoherent, for Jim gathered her up in his arms and carried her in triumph through the scullery door.

"I've come back, mother," he said. "An' here's Hack—an' the Kid. And this is Betty, though she's too much ashamed of herself to say so."

"I'm not," gasped Betty, flushed and indignant. "What a coward you are, Jim. And you needn't be so proud of your strength. A bear's strong. So is a great clumsy bull."

"There's somethin' of the animal in us all," agreed Jim placidly. "I've heard women likened to cats before now. Mother, is there anythin' to eat? We're all starvin' for supper."

Later, the Kid spoke to Jim, and his eyes were shining.

"Why didn't you t-tell me about your m-mother, Jim?" he said. "You c-can't help being what you are w-with such a mother. She's the—the real thing. No mistake about that."

In the low, half-lit kitchen his lank boy-figure and eager, spare young face interested Betty.

"That's the nicest thing I've heard a man say this long time," she cried. "You must have more sense than I thought. I mean——"

"She means that you can't have less," suggested Jim. But there was a new thought in his face, and he spoke it out to Katherine when the evening meal was done and they walked in the garden together between

the nodding hollyhocks and the grave-faced pansies. The white moths of night made holiday about them, and from the verandah came smell of the evil tobacco which Hack used always, and sound of the Kid's quick stutter, and, once and again, Betty's merry laugh. Jim pushed his arm through Katherine's, and his voice dropped.

"Mother," he said, "you've got to lay snares for that Kid. You've got to get him out here and talk to him about the things that he needs to know about. You've got to make him so's if he does a mean trick he'd feel sick to think you might know of it. And you've got to begin right away. To-night, dear. Do you understand?"

Katherine hesitated. Then she looked up at him in the dusk.

"You are afraid of Nick, Jim," she said.

"Yes, mother. I'm doin' the settlin' wi' Nick. But I want you to manage the Kid."

"Jim"—the mother-love in her hurried her voice—"Jim, there's nothing special, is there? I see him so seldom now. It's nothing really wrong?"

"Can't say, mother, until I come to make him foot the bill. You will do what you can with the Kid? Nick's doin' him harm."

"I will, Jim. Yes. But Jim—there's no danger for Nick? You have so much power now, and—you'll not forget that he's just like your own brother?"

"I'm not likely to forget that," said Jim, in his throat. Then he patted her shoulder. "Poor old mother, you've got both your sinners round you again. And the Kid too. Come an' see what Betty's doin' with him."

From her quarter-deck of canvas-chair and slung

foot Betty was raking her audience fore and aft. She glanced up at Jim with eyes gleaming wickedly in the dusk, and he came across, dropping astride of a chair by her elbow.

"I haven't seen you for a year, Betty," he said. "And I haven't seen the real Betty for three behind that."

"Yes, you have." Betty's voice was tart. "I'm 'just Betty' always."

"Hum," said Jim dryly. "I was considerin' you unjust Betty myself."

"Why?"

Betty whipped round with the old flash in her eyes and the old tightness of defiance on her lips. Jim's heart warmed, for the old playfellow was back again. He dropped his voice.

"That's better. I mean, that's Betty. What have you grown up for, old girl?"

"Had to," said Betty indifferently.

"No, you hadn't. Not that way. We used to be good mates once, Betty. Now you're a hedgehog rolled into a ball."

"I was a cat just now. You know a lot of natural history."

"Yes. I'm comin' on. Look here, Betty——"

Betty glanced up at the firm outline of head and shoulders.

"Don't see anything new," she said.

"No? Well, I do. You made me the dumping-ground for your troubles once, old girl. Can't you tell me what's changed you now?"

He shut his hand over hers, looking into her face. Betty caught her breath.

"If—if I could," she hesitated.

"You can. Go on, dear."

"But—I think you know, Jim."

"I don't, Betty. On my honour I don't. Tell me."

"Well—Jim . . . bend closer. I've got a lame foot. But I truly thought you knew."

Jim stood up. He thrust his hands in his pockets, looking down on her. And laughter mixed with the anger in his face.

"You've grown up all right," he said. "You did that sort of thing with your fists once. I rather wish you did it that way still."

"So that you could hit back?"

"I ain't lost the use of my own tongue that I know of. See here, Betty; why have you given me nothin' but chaff in your letters an' talk since the goodness knows when?"

"I don't keep anything but chaff and thistles for conversation with men. You can have which you like."

"Strike me gay, but I guess I'm gittin' both at once." The laughter in Jim's voice was uppermost, and Betty's words came in a heedless rush.

"Things can't be always the same, Jim. We're not children now. I never took two bites at a cherry."

"No. Two cherries to the bite was nearer your mark. But there are cherry-plums still in the garden, Betty."

"And there are medlars, Jim."

Jim jumped, and his face twitched suddenly. Betty's sharp tongue had lashed him often of old, but to-night it left a sting that woke him to surprised consciousness. Betty was not the child Betty any more. She was a maiden, with a maiden's own plane of thought and a maiden's own rights. He looked at her with new eyes.

“You’re right,” he said slowly. “I beg your pardon, Betty. I’d forgot you were grown-up, an’ that’s a fact.”

She watched him go down the verandah, and the tears came to her eyes with a force that burnt. Then, as was the way with Betty, she spoke to herself, very low.

“Well,” she said. “How do you like yourself now, Betty? I suppose there should be pleasure in doing one thing better than any one else, even if that one thing is only doing what you’d give both your ears to undo.”

On the verandah-edge the Kid was whistling, rocking back and forth with hands linked round his knees. And presently Hack and Jim took up the tune, sending out a round peal of melody that halted a sundowner in the dark road to listen.

“Egypt! If you don’t want me,
Why will you haunt me
The way you do.”

The sundowner spat in the dust and trudged on with lagging feet. He also had pasts to haunt him through the lonely ways. Jim’s voice broke on the last word. He got up suddenly, and walked down to the little white gate where the heart-pulling tang of the bush came to him. Here he folded his arms on the post and laid his head on them.

“Roseen,” he said. “Why do you haunt me the way you do? For you belong to Soutar. An’ I’m goin’ to see you again—with Soutar.”

He stood silent for very long, with his shut eyelids against the sleeve of his coat. Then his thoughts frayed out into words once more.

“Nothin’ means more than his honour to a man.

Her kisses don't . . . nor that tiny wee yellow curl on the back o' her neck . . . nor her hands in mine like they've bin more'n once. But Soutar's rotten clean through . . . an' I got power now . . . ah! . . ."

On the lid of his shut eyes he was seeing Roscen's face very clearly, and temptation was burning in him. On the verandah-edge Katherine answered the Kid's questions, with her look seeking the moon-white path where Jim's feet had so lately trod.

"Ask Jim," she said. "He'll be able to tell you the right way. I don't think you'll go far wrong if you follow Jim."

CHAPTER IV

ROSEEN

DIK DIK had neither virtue nor value in itself. But it was a calling-place for all dredgemen and bushmen going through the hills, and there was little of scandal or news in the country-side that did not blow into the collection of bar humpies and public-houses that clung like a fungus to the steep mountain-side with stern grandeur of cliffs and gullies before and behind.

It was red twilight when Jim came up through the bush to Dik Dik, with Hack and the Kid riding beside him and the fat gray kookaburras laughing in the gum-trees like happy-hearted demons. And their laughter, and the big sere gums, and the winding bush-track were to Jim nature's own signature, making him free of the bush-land again.

But it was not a light heart that Jim carried to Dik Dik. The Depot knew that the place was rotten to the core when it sent Jim up there. And Jim knew it too. But the names of the men who were spreading the sin and the uncleanness were yet to be learned, and to such as Jim the learning would be painful.

A half-hour back he had dropped out of the talk ; and whilst Hack and the Kid whistled and sang and told yarns of the " hot days " that had been, Jim rode silent, gathering inner strength and ranging his ideas.

Below the noise and talk and the click of hoofs the

blatter of a horse's galloping sounded far-off on the leafy track. A black smudge swung in sight over the brow of the hill, and Jim picked the rider out among the heavy shadows with the keen instinct of the bushman. Then his face glowed with a gladness such as amazed the Kid.

"Nick!" he cried. "It's Nick. It's the old chap himself, after all. Hillo, old man. . . ."

He flung himself from the saddle as Nick reached earth; and the hand-grip in the dark track with the strong-smelling gums about them sent the blood of both men swifter along their veins. A moment they stared at each other, seeking what each face had to tell. Nick was browner and leaner; his heavy moustache hid his mouth, and there was suggestion somewhere that the trail his careless feet were treading had full share of rocks and thorns. But his hand-clasp clung, and his welcome rang true.

"Jim; Jim, you old sausage. Bli'me, it's good ter see yer agin, Jim. You've changed, though. What 'd yer do it fer? You've changed . . . someways."

He had not the skill to cast the thought into words. But dimly he understood what it was. Since they last met, harness had been bound upon Jim's back and breast for always. His love of a mate, his wide generosity, his pitying forgiveness of sin were thrust behind the law of duty that ruled him. The new sternness about the mouth-muscles showed it, and the squarer shoulders, and the higher head-carriage as of one bearing authority.

But content shone in his face now, and there was full gladness in the shake in his voice.

"I've been lookin' for you to come along these las'

two hours. What are you doin' wi' all that eyebrow over your mouth, anyway? Hold up a sec, man. Let's have a look at you."

Nick felt the keen, steady glance that used to read him through. He backed away from it, shaking his head.

"Not me. I ain't a pictur-book now. Hillo, Hack. Well, Kid; the trap got you nailed, eh?"

"Just practising before he takes you," said the Kid airily. "Are you t-two going to waltz r-round each other down there all n-night? I'm emptier t-than a sardine-tin w-when our pup's been at it."

"O' course," said Hack, and dropped his hand on the Kid's rein. "Empty tins make the most sound always." He sent the two horses racing down the track. "You kip your nose off of them two behind fur a bit," he advised. "Jim might ha' things ter say ter Nick, an' then agin, he mightn't. But you ain't, anyway."

"I'm n-not going to be b-bossed by you," shouted the Kid, and wrenched free in swift fury.

"Yer goin' to be bossed by any one as has a mind ter do it," said Hack serenely. "Don't you fret about that. An' yer going ter see Roseen Mitchell fer the fust time ternight. Did ever yer love a gel yet?"

"Bah," said the Kid in scorn.

"Ezactly. Yer'll be baa-in' like any lost lamb o' the flock one o' these days. But I wouldn't baa arter Roseen ef I was you. She ain't carin' fer sheep much."

"She turned you down, t-then?"

Hack grunted.

"She's turned down better men ner me. I wonner as yer old mare dun't make more pace wi' all the flailin' yer laigs give her."

Behind them Jim ranged Miladi alongside Nick's raking bay, and Nick looked him over with pride.

"The Dik Dik gels'll be turnin' that soft head o' yours inside a week," he said. "For you're no slouch of a feller, an' they'll let you know it."

Jim's smile was forced. There was only one Dik Dik girl from whom he wanted to know it. And she would not tell him.

"I was hopin' you'd a-come down home to meet me," he said.

"I were busy." Nick looked away, speaking rapidly. "They're givin' you a darnee up here to-night, an' Jack West an' me was helpin' make things ready. You'll find quite a push o' the old lot here to-night, Jim. An' there's more'n one ain't sorry we've got you 'stead o' old Malony. He were a tiger . . . a slap-up tiger. I hinted as I didn't know you was all candle-grease yerself . . ."

"Would you rather I was, Nick?"

"Me? It don't trouble me." But the jar in the voice gave the lie here, and Jim heard and remembered. "You'll fin' Trace Hamwell and old Gin Carshook up here, Jim. An' Lone Sutton rode over from Rocky Ridges ter welcome yer. An' Flighty . . . yer remember little Flighty Johnstone . . .?"

They were both fencing with the one blow that must be struck, and both knew it. Then Nick lunged suddenly.

"Mrs. Mitchell's kippin' the 'Bushman's Rest' now, an' Roseen is to home. Soutar's allays gittin' drunk there, an' him an' Mrs. M. has rows reglar. I thought maybe you'd ruther put up at the Dump-house, an' I went round there to see. It'll hev ter be the Bushman's or a tent, old man."

“ Is the Dump-house—— ? ”

“ Now, don’t you. I had three nips ter make me forgit it, an’ I ain’t forgot wuth speakin’ o’. I reckon you’ll hev ter turn that place out o’ doors, Jim. It’s gittin’ ter be a public nuisance. There’s no proper policeman’s quarters in Dik Dik, an’ Malony allays put up at the Bushman’s.”

Jim gave no answer. Day by day . . . day by day—his strength to match against Roseen’s sweet weaknesses. . . . And Soutar . . .

“ If there was decent lodgins anywhere else, Jim——”

Then Jim roused himself.

“ That’s all right. I knew she was there. Gittin’ on well wi’ Jack West, Nick ? ”

“ He ain’t cured yet,” said Nick’s brain swiftly. “ If Roseen kin kip him busy . . . no, by —— I won’t play fer that. What ? Yes, Jack an’ me fit down ter the ground. He’s a wild old devil, though.”

“ You’re not too tame yourself. What have you got the Kid on a string for, old man ? ”

“ We haven’t . . . ” then the lie broke before Jim’s honest eyes. Nick reddened. “ He was too goody-goody,” he said. “ We had ter knock that out o’ him. It didn’t take much. He’s a racketty youngster at heart.”

“ He’s chock-full o’ grit. But he doesn’t know what to do with it. I’m goin’ to look after him a bit, Nick.”

The steady dark eyes met the reckless light ones in challenge. Then Nick shrugged his shoulders.

“ Yer’ll have yer work cut out,” he said carelessly. But Jim knew that the gage was flung down, and he took it up in silence.

Noise and talk came borne to them on the wings of

the fast-closing night. They swung from it to the rocky street and dropped to earth before the old "Bushman's Rest," where it withdrew its familiar dingy front from its line of horse-troughs and bars and rings. The light from the red, cracked lamp was home to Jim, and the yellow gleam lying out from the open door, and the jingle of bit and stirrup-steel and of spurs as the men known of old crowded round him. For all the hills were Jim's heritage, and all had their place in his heart.

A rover finds the mate-grip in many men's hands and the lovelight in many girls' eyes, and Jim had rounded out his life fairly fully in his free years. The memories came swarming in on him now with the grip of hard hands, and the curt, eager greetings, and the pointless, good-natured jokes. But back of it all stood Roseen's memory, pure and sweet as he knew it last.

Then Jim went into the bar on the fore-front of the noisy tide, and behind the glitter of glasses a big, bony woman shook her ear-ringed head at him and reached a big bony hand where hollow bracelets rattled.

"Naughty, naughty," she said archly. "What were you all talkin' about out there? Oh, don't tell me that. They're always flatterin' me, them boys, Jim. This is Jim, ain't it?"

She giggled with her head on one side. And so Jim took his first impression of Roseen's mother, and came as far out in his deductions as he had done with the daughter.

Mrs. Mitchell was plain and angular and arch. She bridled and minced as she spoke. She wore real lace on her frowsy head and false stones on her fingers, and her low collar was caught together by a great brooch

which asserted in silver letters on a five-barred gate :
“ I am Joshua’s.”

She blinked at Jim, leaned forward, and patted his hand.

“ Oh, come, pet, don’t be shy,” she told him. “ I calls everybody by their Christian names, don’t I, Lone ? Like as not, it’s the only Christian thing about them. But I don’t mind, bless your heart, I love ’em all. Tad Berringer, if you’re goin’ to call me a darlin’ before all the fellers I . . . Ah, he’s a bad boy, Jim, a bad boy. But I know him. He wouldn’t be cottonin’ up to me if there wasn’t Roseen behind me. Not none o’ you would. Ah, what it is to hev a pretty daughter.”

She moved quickly, setting out the glasses as the men called their drinks. To Jim she was a gaudy kinematograph of jingling bracelets and prominent elbows and glinting ear-rings, and her words made his throat hot. What kind of woman was this to protect Roseen from the rough speech and the rough admiration of such men as drifted through the “ Bushman’s Rest ” ? Then he shook himself and dropped into the noise and talk and laughter round the bar, but the Kid stole out of it to the cool night by the horse-trough. Connection with Jim through these last few days, and sight of Jim’s mother, had quickened the gentle blood in him again. He was not one of these men, and shame burnt him in that he had tried to be one.

A peal of laughter rolled out to him, followed by Jack West’s easy voice.

“ That’s the ticket, Jim. We’ll get you down to talk sense to our Sunday-school sucker.”

The Kid’s face went purple-red in the dark. He brought his fist down on the rail as he had seen Nick do, and his oath was one of Nick’s.

“ By —— ! no man’s going t-to keep on calling me that. J-Jack never says anything else. An’ I can go the pace. I c-can, Jim said Nick’d give me a b-bad time if he liked me. That’s a l-lie ; he’s always decent to me, and he’s not done me any harm at all.”

He pushed back through the crowd, and up to the bar.

“ Three-star,” he said. “ Yes, a long-sleever. Where are you, Soutar ? I told you the next one was on to me.”

An hour later Jim heard the flutter of light feet and light skirts past his door, and with it came the waft of a sweet perfume that had been too familiar once, for Roseen used it always. He turned to the window, where a couple of violins were bracing up below and an accordion flung out a reckless rag-time air that called feet on the pavement to beat time.

“ The old places . . . an’ the old mates . . . an’ not the old loves any more,” he said ; “ how is that goin’ to run true, I wonder ? ”

Down the stair Bignonia was ringing a cow-bell, and the noise of hurrying boots and the hoarse talk and laughter was threaded through with women’s voices and with the rattle of carts in the streets.

Then Jim ran down into the midst of it, finding Lone Sutton braced against the greasy wall, rubbing his red face with a redder handkerchief.

“ No room in there,” he said, “ they’re full up. My word, we’ll have a hot time to-night. I saw that flyin’ Kid o’ yourn openin’ soda-water all over the place jes’ now, Nick. He got Mrs. Morrissey in the ear wi’ a cork, an’ I’ll tell yer this—he’s the prettiest hand at apologisin’ ever I’ve come acrost. She’s givin’ him the fust darnce.”

“ His sins are comin’ home to roost quick enough,” said Nick ; “ got one outer Mother M. yet, Lone ? ”

“ Not a hope ; they’re round her thick as hivin’ bees in there.” He turned his jolly face on Jim. “ A feller gits more fun ter the square inch out o’ that old biddy than any side-show I’ve met up wi’,” he explained. “ She’s the best ever, an’ she takes her pard along inter the bar an’ shouts him every time. Pays her ways handsome, she does.”

The tide, ebbing and flowing round the dining-room door, brought the Kid out, red-faced and exultant. He waved his hand at the brothers and his voice was thick.

“ B-brothers all,” he cried ; “ one cherry’n t-two t-twin stalks. No, that not right. An’ it’s only y-your backs are alike . . . and v-voices. Take my place, Jim, kep’ it f’you, y’know. So long.”

He passed, and Nick glanced sideways at his brother ; then he shrugged his shoulders.

“ Well—if it’s got ter come it has ter,” he muttered.

Jim found his seat between Mrs. Morrissey and Warrego Harry, and in the joy of swapping old memories he forgot the Kid and the unseen Roseen, for Warrego Harry was a horse-breaker of the roving school—undersized, steel-muscled, “ flash ” in his dress, and cheery and loyal in his heart. Jim and he had met on many different tracks, and they carried their talk with them out to the moonlight and the loafing, waiting crowd, and put the end of it through with the magic of tobacco to help.

The moon shone vivid on the street and the moving men, and on the high mountain shoulders and down the gorge ; and through the pallor of it rode suddenly

the Kid on his great raw mare, whooping, cracking his stockwhip, bumping in the saddle as he followed Jack West. Jack West was astride a young hill bullock, guiding it with a skilful whip, and Warrego Harry smote his palms on his knees as he looked.

“ That everlastin’ Kid,” he cried in his wheezy treble. “ But they’re pullin’ the core outer the hours ; like me, jes’ like me afore the brown-skeeters got holt on me. I’ve seen a clo’-peg on a clo’-line didn’t sit tighter’n Jack. But that thing behind him ! My, my ; it’s a hidjous sight is a man who rides when he ain’t born fer ter do it.”

Jim said nothing until he caught the Kid alone in a corner of the stable. Then his voice was low, for about the stalls and feed-bins men were moving.

“ Kid,” he said, “ I want to make a bargain wi’ you to-night.”

“ Well ? ” demanded the Kid suspiciously.

Jim smiled, and the brimming kindness in the eyes and in the strong face drew the best of the Kid into life again.

“ I don’t want to drink to-night,” said Jim, “ and I don’t think that you do. Shall we just make an arrangement between ourselves that we won’t touch anythin’ stronger than soda ? Shall we, old chap ? ”

A moment the Kid was silent, then his lips quivered.

“ All right,” he said only, but Jim was content.

Five minutes later his content fled, leaving in its place a sharp ache of unrest, for just five minutes later he saw Roseen Mitchell again.

This was in the big dancing-room that was lit with kerosine lamps and candles, and made gay with festoons of clematis and knots of golden wattle and with stiff-

leaved fan-palms that stood on their gouty stems among the great gum and hardwood branches. A piccolo and an accordion battered out, "Wait at the gate, mother darling," with an energy that brought the dancers to their feet in a crowd ; and the homely, mixed-up music, the mutter of friendly voices, the vigorous, strong smell of the gum-branches, were making the world feel very good to Jim. And then suddenly, without warning, he saw Roseen again, with Jack West at her shoulder.

Roseen was leaning back on the sacks that made seats in a corner. Her fair, delicate face was upturned, and the pale gold of her hair shone against the fan-palms. Jim caught his breath sharply. The face was more wistful than of old, and the sweet mouth drooped ; the hand lying near Jack West's knee was china-white and fragile, and the small, slight body, and slender, bared neck, brought to Jim in his full-blooded strength a reverence that was almost awe.

Then Nick spoke at his elbow.

"Jack'll have Soutar ontar him if he don't watch out. Soutar looks arter his own. Jim, Mrs. Mitchell's hangin' fire fer you ; see her over there, lookin' like a grass-parrot in that shiny green stuff. She's wearin' that five-barred gate she calls a brooch ; it's got ' I am Joshua's ' on it. Mitchell was Joshua. You be careful as she don't come out wi' one sayin' ' I am Jim's ' one o' these days. Come here, Kid, I've got a girl for you."

Jim did not answer. He did not hear when the men broke down the room with a clatter, when the waiting girls were picked up all along the line as a teller picks coins off a counter, when the rattle of the music broke into a waltz, and Roseen was swept away in the whirl of

it on Jack West's arms. But he did his part like a man through the next hour and the hour after, and it was late before Nick saw the meeting which he had been dreading and looking for—the meeting of Jim and Roseen.

It was short—just a few words spoken, one look given and returned—but it sent Nick out into the moonlight cursing. Here he fell over Algy, the tow-headed boy who had once brought Jim a pink note of Roseen's on the Buntree track, and promptly he cuffed the boy on the ear.

Algy was Roseen's brother, and he many times found his relationship a valuable asset. "I'll tell Roseen," brought all men to heel soon or late; but he knew his boundaries to the last inch, and he knew that he had no hold on Nick. Here "I'll tell Roseen" was worthless for the first time in its life, and he approved of Nick in consequence.

"Wot's that noo bloke like?" he asked, rubbing his ear. "That brother o' yourn. Got any sense—hey?"

"Algernon, my son," said Nick thoughtfully, "I don't know. You'll be best able to tell me next time I come up. Now—what d'yer think of Soutar yourself—candidly, you know?"

Algy's candid opinion startled the Kid, enlightened though the last year had made him. Nick grunted.

"What'd yer let him git engaged ter yer sister for, then?" he asked.

"Oh, git out," said Algy, and chuckled; "as if you didn't know. A feller over at White Hat bet her as there was one thing she couldn't do wi' a man. 'There isn't, then,' says she. 'Yes, there is,' he says. 'Tell it,' she says. 'Make him speak well o' Soutar,' he says.

'Done,' says she, an' off she goes an' fixes up wi' Soutar. An' I'm blamed if the feller from White Hat wasn't the fust ter eat his words when she telled him she was goin' ter be spliced ter Soutar. I was listenin'. By Crumps! he did climb down. Yer couldn't see his laigs goin'. She's got all the fellers on a string sence then, sayin' pretty things o' Soutar, but she's gittin' about full up o' that game. She'll be havin' a fly at that barmy relashun o' yourn d'reckly. He's the feller I tuk a note down inter Cadger's clearin' fer, ain't he? "

Nick was regarding him with interest.

"I've heard Jim quote somethin' about 'the angels sang in Heaven when she was born,'" he said; "I reckon they did some rejoicin' when they got rid o' you." Then he whipped round on the Kid, and his eyes were stern. "If ever you git a chance ter put a spoke in that gel's wheel, *do* it," he said. "It's wuth Jim's life to him."

The Kid heard with a shock, and he remembered when a little later Roseen stood opposite him in the quadrille. She was looking up at Soutar, and her eyes were very tender and submissive.

"They're making a great fuss about Jim Kyneton to-night," she whispered, "but I haven't danced with him, Bob."

Jim had not asked her, but there are more ways than one of telling a truth.

Soutar dragged at his ragged moustache, and his eyes were jealous.

"Don't you," he said sharply; "don't you darnce wi' him—ever. Don't yer have nothin' ter do wi' him—ever. I cud tell yer things about Jim Kyneton——"

The Kid heard so much. Then Roseen stepped out

daintily towards him, and he flushed as he took her slim hands in his. Roseen smiled and veiled her eyes as the Kid swung her and let her go.

“ I believe I know your name,” she said demurely.

Except Jim’s mother, no woman had ever drawn the Kid.

“ You little cat,” he said in his heart, and backed away to his place.

But he was uneasy through the long hours of merri-ment that came after, and through the speeches that Flighty Johnstone made and that Trace Hamwell prompted until Flighty rounded on him in fury.

“ Is it you or me makin’ this speech ? ” he demanded.

“ Dunno yet,” answered the imperturbable Trace. “ I’m goin’ ter fill up the holes, an’ it’s fer you ter say how big they’re goin’ ter be. You’ve lathered me sick wi’ that blamed thing fer a month, an’ I’m not goin’ ter let the other fellers off. Fire away. I’m keepin’ tally. You’d got ter ‘an’ knowin’ Jim Kyneton ter be a better man than myself’—which I’d say twict if I was you fer fear we mightn’t notice it.”

The Kid joined in the roar of laughter, and he joined in the clapping as Jim swung himself up on the unsteady pile of boxes beside the M.C.

“ Ladies an’ gentlemen,” began Lone Sutton in his best manner, “ let me introduce Mounted Constable Kyneton——”

That ended his speech ; for the boys took charge, and the dust flew and the old floor rocked under the stamp of feet, and the bellowing of many cheers roared out to the quiet night. Then Warrego Harry’s thin pipe rose up.

“What’s the matter wi’ Jim Kyneton?” he yelled. And the deep answer swept round the room:

“He’s all right.”

Then the Kid looked at Jim. His face was something whiter than usual, and the Kid knew in his heart that—to his own self—Jim was not all right. Then Jim straightened slightly, faced the room, and spoke:

“Ladies an’ gentlemen an’ Flighty——”

“That’s Jim’s feelins respectin’ Flighty,” interpreted Hack.

“I have got to congratulate you on three things to-night. The first is on havin’ me back——”

“Oh,” yelled the room in delight, and Jim looked at them with the twinkle shut out of his eyes.

“What’s the matter?” he objected mildly. “You can’t help bein’ glad to have me back. When I hear Flighty tellin’ what I’m like, it makes me sorry I’m not one o’ you so’s I could be glad too. Flighty told you——”

For a space he talked as the Kid had heard him talk more than once—with a slow, drawling humour and a dry common sense that men always connected with Jim of the Ranges. Then voice and face and manner changed in a swiftness that startled his hearers. He leaned forward, with the light striking across his earnest eyes and a ring of half-entreaty in his tone.

“Mates,” he said, “you know what I’m here for. You’re all friends o’ mine, more especially after to-night. But I’ve got my work to do. For the Lord’s sake don’t give me too much of it. Play the game. I’ve heard that there’s been more than crooked runnin’ at the race-meetins round here, an’ I’ve heard that there’s been less than clean, honest wash-ups on some o’ the dredges.

Play straight wi' me, boys, an' don't let me have to take the hand of any man here except in friendship."

He stopped and jumped down through a sharp silence. Jack West spoke at Roseen's shoulder.

"Come out with me," he said breathlessly; "come out an' tell me what you're lookin' wi' those big eyes for, Roseen? Haven't you forgotten Jim Kyneton yet?"

Roseen flashed a glance of fear at him.

"Jim's too clever," she gasped; "he can find out anything he likes. And perhaps he will like. Jack, you'll be careful? Oh, you will be careful?"

Jack West laughed, and neither Soutar nor Jim would have cared to see his eyes.

"I couldn't be that even for you. But I'd be anything else in all the world. You know that, don't you, my girl?"

"But how should I know?" said Roseen sweetly. "How should I know what any man thinks?"

Perhaps there was no woman knew better. And most assuredly no woman knew better that to be in love is not a condition, but an art. She had proved this many many times before Jim came to the "Bushman's Rest," and through the following months she began to prove it again. For nothing rouses a woman's desire to conquer so surely as the dread that she has lost a power once held, and through those months Roseen did not know if ever again Jim of the Ranges would come to heel when she whistled him.

And Jim himself did not know, although he had tried to find out. But self-analysis is like shaking a feather-pillow with a split in it. The man who tries usually lets loose on himself far more than he knew was there; and

this being so, he fastens up the pillow again in hasty shame, denying all responsibility in regard to its internals.

Jim had attempted self-analysis more than twice in these later days, and always he had turned from it sick of soul. For he could never pretend lies to himself. Roseen would shed Soutar from her life as naturally as a gum-tree sheds its bark when she had done with him. But was she therefore more the woman for Jim to love as a wife and a mate? Roseen could never be mate to Jim's soul, and he knew it. She could never take the best in him, and carry it on and up to Eternity. She drew the second best in him, and daily he began to understand how passionate and strong that second best was. But he stood on his feet and looked at it; for if his weaknesses were great his strength was great also.

"If she chucks Soutar I must have her," he said. "I must, I must; there's no good pretendin' I hope to make her different. I'll never do that. But . . . I'll have her because I can't help it. An' now I'll go up an' see Roper. Where did I put those bull's-eyes for Billy?"

Through the dark night he rode up to the shanty set far and lonely in the bush, and he took his reward when Billy's thin arms clenched round his neck.

CHAPTER V

NICK WON'T LET GO

“ BUT where's the Kid ? ”

Nick laid his hand on the rough two-board table in the tent-centre, raked in his win, and shuffled the cards.

“ That's two more to us, Harrop,” he said. “ I think we'll leave the Kid out o' this after all, Jack.”

Jack West stood with one hand on the uplifted tent-flap yet. Gray haze of tobacco-smoke moved between him and the four men round the table, and, behind, a wet wind whipped the night into sound and made a patter of rain on the gum-leaves.

“ Where's the Kid ? ” he said again, and Harrop laughed.

“ Gone up to Dik Dik after Jim Kyneton,” he said. “ They're thick as thieves, and, when the Kid tumbles to our little game, Jim will be the first man to know it. And the Kid has more than an inkling already.”

Harrop was dredge-master of the *Stars and Stripes*. He was a little, white-faced, white-livered man, with the desire to cheat his kind and a lack of the courage to carry it through.

Jack West dropped the flap and came forward. It was Saturday night, after hours, and, with exception of the Kid, the full gang of the *Stars and Stripes* were gathered in Nick's tent by request. Nick jerked his thumb towards an empty box.

"Take a seat," he said cheerfully. "Your deal, Calloway."

But Jack West came over, laying both hands on the table, and looking round on the men.

"Hold on a minute," he said. "I think we'd all like to understand this, Nick. What do you mean to do about the Kid?"

Nick made the cards with swift, nervous hands, and his dark face twitched. Since Jim had come to Dik Dik something of the old honourable impulses had waked in Nick again. He was determined on the track that he was treading; but he had loosed his hold on the Kid more than a little, and the Kid had turned to Jim as easily as water runs downhill.

"The Kid will have to be told, I suppose," he said; "but put him on his honour, an' let him keep his hands clean. I don't want him ter get five years over it."

"Ner more we don't want ter git five years neither," said Calloway. "An' wot's more, we ain't goin' ter. So that Kid's got ter come in with us, an' no chances left. Leave him free ter tell, an' him pals wi' a trap! You ring off that funny business, Nick. It ain't good enough."

"He's not free if he's on his honour," said Nick sharply.

Jack West beat the rough boards with his finger-tips.

"A man's honour doesn't go far when he's thinkin' of his skin," he said. "The Kid has got to be implicated along with the rest of us. It's the only way to keep him quiet. I've told you this before, Nick."

"Perhaps if you threatened him—" began Harrop, and Nick flung down the cards with an oath of contempt.

"Threaten him? The Kid? D'yer generally strike

a match on a stone ter keep it from lightin' ? That's what threatenin' does ter the Kid. Jack an' me have tried it."

" Yes. And so—he should have been here to-night."

Nick said nothing ; and it was Barnes, the clod, who made the next advance.

" You've got ter square yer brother, Nick."

" I won't. I can't, an' I'm not goin' to try. I've warned you o' that from the beginnin'. If Jim finds anythin' out he'll git the darbies on me quick as on the nex' man. I know him. I tell you I've no power there, an' I'd only mess things up if I was ter try."

Harrop fingered his little pale moustache.

" I thought you and your brother were a very affectionate pair," he said in his light, flippant voice.

Nick winced. Memory of Jim's warm arm flung over his shoulder and of Jim's genial voice in his ear smote him, and he turned on Harrop swiftly.

" Suppose yer use yer thinkin' parts on somethin' else," he suggested. " If they'll bear the strain, that is. You can fix the Kid how you like. Blamed if I care. But I won't touch Jim. I know better."

" You've got to fix the Kid," said Jack West meaningly.

" Damned if I will. Why ? "

" Because you've got to give us proof that you're not hedging. Jim and you are pretty thick still. How are we to know that you won't wait till we've got the gold and then turn King's evidence ? "

Nick stood up very slowly, thrusting his hands through his belt.

To more than one man the movement was suggestive of Jim when Jim was backed to a wall with no thought of quarter.

“Is there any man here wants to second that?” he asked.

A growl ran through the tent, and from the corner cot a fireman interpreted it.

“I’ll go as many figgers as yer like, my bloomin’ chicken.”

“It’s not a question of your honour, you know,” said Jack West hastily. “But we’ve got to have your voucher because of Jim. That’s only common sense. You see it, don’t you?”

Nick laughed softly.

“Oh, yes; I see it. It ain’t a question o’ honour. We’re none of us in a position ter talk about honour. But you want me ter damn the Kid so’s ter prove my honour, all the same. Well, I reckon I knew he’d got ter be damned some time back. But—I’d rather another man did it.”

“Why?”

Nick knew why. It would bring him into direct collision with Jim, and that would hurt more than he cared for anything to hurt him. He gave no answer. Calloway turned on the others.

“Nick’s the one ter do it fer two reasons,” he said. “The Kid likes him, an’ he ain’t got two civil words for the most on us. An’ there’s Jim Kyneton standin’ up be’ind this proposition. He ain’t got ter have a look in. Hands up if it’s Nick’s game. Now, Nick——”

Before the show of rough palms he looked at Nick triumphantly.

“Well?” he said. “*Now* will yer do it?”

Behind the gray veil of smoke Nick’s face was white, and sweat-drops marked the forehead. He was strong and tall and virile as Jim himself; but he knew with

which man lay the greater power. He caught his breath in a half-gasp.

"Yes," he said, "I'll do it."

"An' yer can side-track that blamed brother o' yourn——"

Nick wheeled on the speaker with an oath and an out-flung arm of dissent.

"I tell you," he said distinctly, "that I won't meddle wi' Jim one way or other. That's my last word. Take it or leave it. I don't care."

His voice was sharp and fierce as a thunder-clap. In the silence following, the patter of rain in the leaves sounded insistently. Harrop giggled nervously, stood up, and overturned his stool.

"Well, the sooner you can get hold of him the better," he said. "He had suspicions the last day Jermyn came down to see us. Calloway was fool enough to call him off the screens before we'd done talking."

"Jack an' me are goin' up to Dik Dik in the mornin'," said Nick, "an' the Kid is ridin' back wi' us. I'll settle him quick as I can. But I will have to take him on the flank, an' I don't know when that will be."

Barnes, the clod, was chuckling as he rocked on his candle-box.

"He'll do us all yet," he said. "The Kid'll do us. He'll split—split like a gorse-seed in the sun. That's yer bloomin' Kid."

Harrop looked at Nick, and Nick gave answer gravely.

"I'll guarantee that he comes in wi' us an' don't split," he said.

"But," insisted Barnes, rocking still, "if the Kid knows anythin' he's got ter know all. We must know

as yer compromise him good. No hanky-panky here, my boy."

A dark, silent man glanced up from the corner.

"That's truth," he said. "We must prove it. Bring him next Saturday. He has got to have his hands in it up to the wrists. And he has got to know the penalty if he splits. You understand this, Nick? And you can make sure?"

Nick sat on the cot-side, smoking and kicking his heel on the upright. His face was sullen, and his voice matched it.

"What you says goes, Jermyn," he told the dark man. "But that Kid's word would hold his tongue for him any day o' the week."

Some one laughed. Then talk and argument rose again. The group round the card-table shuffled and changed. The beat of the rain fell monotonously, but Nick ceased to hear or to heed. His thoughts had run back to Jim, and to the old days that were dead and done and that he could not bury. There were times when he would have pulled out of this if he could. But evil had sapped his conscience for so long; and gambling and drinking and the racing of horses had sapped his pocket until shame was dying and greed for gold held its place. But his love for Jim would not die. The days that brought Jim down to Buntree were white days in Nick's tally-book, and he sought Jim at Dik Dik without vital reason, just that he might feel again Jim's firm hand-grip and meet again the genial smile in the eyes.

Jim had laboured hard through those months at Dik Dik. He took charge of the cricket-team, and the Kid and many another youth from the dredges played

there in the long evenings and on the holidays. He knotted the boys of the township into some sort of a club for the abolishment of cigarettes and the creation of muscle, and he swelled them to bursting with pride when he carried their badge on his own breast. He broke in more than one wild horse of the hills ; and his steady patrols, and the keen intuition which led him like lightning to the core of the matter, had a moral effect in quarters least dreamed of. And always, in thought, word, and deed, he kept himself away from Roseen, for Soutar's ring was on her finger yet, and it never grew easy to Jim to see Soutar touch Roseen.

But they were good days that he found among the hills, and his life was full, bubbling with goodwill to the brim. He knew every living soul for long leagues out ; and more than one lonely clearing had seen snatches of comedy or tragedy, when a youth caught in evil-doing had given Jim sullen resentment, and later, repentance, and promises which Jim helped him to keep.

And then the good days were broken. First by Saltire's command, and next by the Kid on the very morning when Nick and Jack West came to seek him in Dik Dik, and Jack West lounged with him at the kitchen window of the "Bushman's Rest," watching Roseen make pastry.

Whatever Roseen chose to be or to do she was worth the watching. She was variable as sun on rippling water, and sweet as the clove-pink bloom, and full of little dainty tricks as the bush birds flirting in the under-scrub. Jack West let his pipe out as his eyes followed her tripping feet and her light girl-figure ; and the restlessness that had driven him into sin made more

bitter the ache at his heart. For Roseen was the woman whom he loved, and who had given him heaven for a space and then barred him out of it.

Roseen's sleeves were rolled back from the rounded arms. There was a dab of flour on the forehead that was no less white, and a tint in her delicate cheeks that shamed the wild rose swaying round the window-frame. Behind her was perspective of leaping flame in the open fireplace, of swinging pots and kettles, of Bignonia blundering clumsily down the stairs that led from the dining-room. The Kid watched lazily through his pipe-smoke, and across the yard the creek sang, unknowing of the precipice. Roseen shaped her pie, telling of a Big Man of the district who had come to watch her cook in the week before. Her voice was like the murmur of bees among the scented bavardia, and something of the cloying sweetness of the flower was in herself.

"What?" said Jack West, with a sudden laugh. "You never let *him* sit on the doorstep or the window-sill, did you?"

Roseen shook her head where sunlight washed the pale gold.

"I keep those for you," she said. "No; I gave him the best chair in the best place. And that place was right in front of the kitchen fire." The soft, unlined face broke into dimples for the moment. "He was very polite," she said. "I didn't think there would be enough of him left to go; but he stood it for half-an-hour, and it was a hotter day than this."

The Kid looked at her curiously. He was wondering how many men Roseen would offer to mental and physical flames before Time sapped her beauty from

her. Jack West leaned across to her, and she was quick to read the pain in his eyes.

"No need for that, little Roseen," he said. "You can burn a man's heart in him without the kitchen fire."

Roseen dimpled again.

"Perhaps I didn't bother to try that way with him," she said.

"It's not a bother to you," said the Kid suddenly. "You play w-with every man you see just as a k-kitten plays with a dead bird. And they're all dead birds when y-you've drawn a bead on them, poor devils."

Roseen's trill of laughter brought echo from a tiny mistletoe-wren in the orange-tree without. She lifted her skirts with her finger-tips and bobbed the Kid a curtsey.

"That's real," she cried gaily; "that's a real compliment, for you didn't mean it for that a bit, you know. But—I don't draw beads on everybody."

Jack West looked at her sharply.

"What about Jim Kyneton?" he said.

Roseen's mood changed. She dusted her slender fingers, smiling demurely.

"He's a dead bird too," she said.

"He's n-not," cried the Kid, upsetting the box on which he knelt. "I tell you he's not. H-he'd never look at you w-when you're engaged to that Soutar. I know he wouldn't."

Roseen was unembarrassed. She leaned her elbows on the table, dropped her chin in the curve of her hands, and looked on the men with the faintest smile in the mystery of her gray eyes. Jack West knocked out his pipe.

“Don’t,” he said unsteadily. “If you looked at him like that I wouldn’t give much for his chances. What was the devil about when he made you, Roseen ? ”

“Haven’t you found out yet ? ” asked Roseen.

Her voice had a low, caressing note in it, and the Kid stirred restlessly.

“What are you meaning about J-Jim ? ” he demanded.

“It isn’t always the girl who does the meaning, is it ? ” suggested Roseen.

“Oh—curse it all,” said the Kid, roused to action. “Come down to the creek. I want to speak to you, and, with the confounded girl stumping round, one hasn’t a hope. Come.”

Roseen demurred. Then she came ; stepping daintily over the baked, dusty grass and the litter of the yard to the cool of the little brown creek by the wattle-trees. The scent of wattle was on the air, and Roseen pulled a gold bunch, holding it against her ear.

“It makes my hair look horrid, doesn’t it ? ” she sighed.

“It makes the wattle look like a dab of crude ochre,” said Jack West. “Give it to me, Roseen.”

He drew the stalk through his button-hole, looking down on it with bitten lips, and the Kid spoke from the bank where he was prodding ants with a stick.

“Look here,” he said, “if you don’t go fooling with Jim I’ll b-buy you a pearl brooch next time I go to town. You’re dead nuts on p-pearls, I know.”

This frank exchange and barter was all that his man’s wit could bring to meet a girl’s intention. Jack West glanced at him in sudden amusement. Roseen spoke serenely.

"Jim would buy me two," she said.

"So'll I. Half-a-dozen. Come, will that do? You're going to marry Soutar, you know."

Roseen made no answer. She stripped the bloom from a gray soft wattle-stem, twisted its bareness into a hoop, and slid it over her third finger on top of Soutar's ring. Jack West smiled a little. He understood the significance. The Kid came to his feet quickly.

"By Heaven!" he cried. "You can't be engaged to them both at once! It's—it's bigamy."

Jack West dropped against the wattle-tree and laughed himself limp. Roseen looked on the two with the little smile dawning again in her eyes. Then she went back to the kitchen with the two rings circling her finger still.

"Hum," said the Kid dubiously. "I d-don't understand that girl, and I don't know that I want to. Where's Jim?"

"Handling a young 'un down in Chaney's yard," said Jack West, and the Kid went seeking, in anxiety and puzzle of spirit.

He found Nick on the yard-fence with half the male population of Dik Dik about him, and Jim and a long-tailed, upstanding, chestnut filly in the centre, linked without love by a lunging-rope. Jim was in shirt and trousers only, with sleeves rolled up, and dark hair wet on his forehead. The Kid pulled himself up on the rail and got out his pipe.

"Been at this long?" he asked of the man beside him.

"About ten minutes to-day. But he's been handling her this last fortnight. A little vixen, she is, too."

"H-he knows all about this sort of thing, doesn't

he ? ” said the Kid, blinking through the sunlight at Warrego Harry, in tight cords and a scarlet neckerchief, where he preened like a parrot on the farther fence.

“ Jim Kyneton ? What d’yer think ? If every line o’ his body don’t tell yer, my tongue’s no use. He were born for a breaker, that feller—though he’s a bit on the heavy side ; but he’s the on’y man ever I see Warrego Harry watch wi’ that grin on to his face.”

“ Oh,” said the Kid, and humped his shoulders, staring at Jim in a growing content. For, very surely, Jim was too strong for Roseen Mitchell or any other woman to trouble. To the Kid he was not the Jim who had ran with the Matchlock colt across that bush-clearing a year ago. That man had been buoyant and light-footed and gay in the eyes. This man—tight-lipped, hard-eyed, steel-muscled—pressed every advantage cruelly, and baulked every attempt with the relentless swiftness of lightning, and followed up every opening with an unwearying doggedness that was terrible as Fate.

During the last fortnight Jim had given to the filly all the gentling, all the serenity of patience whereby a good man gains a horse, and he had advanced not one inch on his set course. Then he knew that he must go out to her, and meet her and conquer her in open fight. And there, in the dusty yard, with her unshod hoofs true on the rough stones, and the half-stumped tree-butts and the great bushy flank of Dik Dik hill making background, he did it. Nick watched as one who understood, and his eyes followed each break away, each bearing on the lunging-rope, with a curious fancy that so he himself might one day try to fling free

from Jim, the machine of the law, and so, one day, might Jim follow up and baulk him.

Through the swimming heat and the bird-song stillness of that Sunday forenoon the battle of man and brute dropped back like a stone to the primitive ages. It ran on the naked, merciless lines of strength and skill, and it was deadly equal and deadly fierce in its silence.

Once the Kid cried out, and the man beside slewed round to look at him with amused contempt.

"On'y got his shirt," he said. "Jim knows better'n ter let her get more. She'll be tryin' ter savage him agin before he's done wi' her."

The filly flung herself flat, beat the air with her fore-feet, rushed Jim open-mouthed with her buck teeth snapping. And Jim circled and dodged; and pulled in the slack and let go; and came again and again and again until Jack West, leaning at Nick's shoulder, turned his mouth to Nick's ear.

"That fellow doesn't know what it is to be beat," he said. "I tell you if he lays his nose on a trail there'll be no whipping him off. He's a tiger; a damn tiger. Look at him. She's bested him a hundred times, and he comes for more as greedily as a kid at a school-feast."

Nick kept silence. This was the great struggle between mind and brute force which began at the first development of soul, and which will never have an ending. But it was something more. Quite truly Jim did not know when he was beaten. He was in all the condition that daily muscle-pommelling and cold showers and physical exercises could give; but his knees shook, and the sweat was chilly on him from exhaustion, and the dust was mud on his heated face

and neck. And yet his spirit was unbroken. Warrego Harry thrust his wizened face forward where he sat on the top rail with his heels hooked in the one below.

"My, my, Jim," he cried. "You've guv us fair play fer our money. Let it up till to-morrow, lad. She's an outcast, I reckon. She'll break her heart, but she'll never be broke."

Jim heard, and he guessed it for truth. His sympathy went out generously to the filly through every struggle and every ding-dong fight. But he also was made of the breed that does not give in. Nick saw the half-laugh on his face as he wheeled, meeting the sun and the rearing filly. Then he felt the fence creak under him as men hurled themselves from it and leapt across to the tangle of hoofs and white shirt-sleeves and the *something* crushed down on the earth and hid instantly by the crowding bodies. He thrust through them, blind, deaf, and unknowing. He saw the wild white of the filly's eyes, and the blood and foam on her nostril; and he caught at the shoulders where Jim lay over her flank, and pulled him free.

The Kid, pushing in after the manner of a corkscrew, saw the loose, moveless limbs and the whitened face, blank as a baby's, and he felt his throat close and his eyes burn hot. Then some one swung him aside, and the blaze of the sun beat on him, and he heard his own voice speaking from very far off:

"Is he . . . hurt at all?"

Nick dragged the shirt open, feeling for the heart. He would have died for Jim any day of the week; but he could not give up his daily life to this man whom he loved better than himself. For human nature is a

paradox, and a chameleon, and anything else that is not run by specified law and method.

"Jim," he said, under his breath, "Jim—Jim—oh, Jim."

Jim's eyelids flickered, raised, and Jim grinned sleepily.

"Don't tickle," he murmured; then louder, "you old swab; you know your way there without hands. . . ."

His voice faltered and trailed away, his lips were a white line. Then Jack West dropped on one knee beside him. Jack had studied medicine before he took to engineering, and Dik Dik owned nothing more reliable in the way of doctors.

"I'm going to overhaul you, Jim," he said. "Give way a little, men."

It was a ten minutes of keenest agony for Nick. Jim lay like a log, unspeaking, unmoving, and all the love that Nick had ever borne his brother tortured him, fierce and strong. He found himself praying in wordless prayers, and a childish terror overmastered him lest Jim had indeed gone on to that other life where Nick in his sins could not follow. Then he heard Jack West speaking:

"Sound as a bell, except for a few bruises and a bite on the upper arm. More like a touch of sunstroke, I fancy. He'll be all right in an hour or two. Cart him in, some of you fellows."

Nick stood up, dazed and white-faced. Jack West laid a hand on his shoulder and drew him away to the outskirts where the Kid stood alone in the trampled grass, shivering, and swallowing very hard.

"Jim's out of it to-day," said Jack West. "You strike while the iron's hot, Nick. Get him round to

Cleghorn's, and, if we can't fix up something there, I'll never back Cleg again."

"No," said Nick inaudibly, and turned back to follow the tramp of feet. Jack West blocked him.

"There are more than you to be safeguarded," he said. "I don't think you'll find it wise to be a fool, Nick."

Nick shook him off with a sharp oath. Then he straightened with something of his old swagger and crossed over to the Kid. The Kid's eyes were blue as the summer sky, and they brimmed with tears that pricked Nick to sudden anger. What right had the Kid to care? What right had the Kid to walk as an honourable man with Jim when Jim's own brother could not?

"Hillo, Kid," he said. "What are you doin' ter-day?"

"Jim and I were going riding," said the Kid. "Nick, he m-might have been killed."

"Oh, rats. Jim's bin in tighter corners than that before now; but you won't go ridin' wi' him this afternoon. Sunstroke's like a booze. He'll have to sleep it off an' kip quiet for a day or two. Will yer come round wi' Jack an' me ter Cleghorn's? He's got some dandy little bull-terrier pups——"

"Oh," cried the Kid, and the blood rushed to his face. "I'll go. D'you think he'd let me have one? I'd sooner have a bull-terrier than anything."

Dogs were the Kid's one worship those days, and Nick went to see Jim with the knowledge that he had laid the train which he must presently fire. Jim was on his bed, with a bandaged head and a curtain hung across the window. He grinned feebly.

"See my tiara?" he demanded. "Lord! I didn't know one head could ache so hard. Jack says it's sunstroke, an' I fancy he's right, for I'm sick as a cat if I move. I didn't think that filly'd get me down. She's a good plucked one, though, Nick."

"Yes," said Nick absently.

He walked to the window, staring out on the stables and the hill behind through the hole in Mrs. Mitchell's old shawl. Jim watched him with half-shut, aching eyes. Several things told by the Kid's artless babble had troubled him since he had seen Nick last, and he guessed that there was danger somewhere although he could not place it yet. He had traced Nick's influence on the Kid and found it to be evil, and he had known that he spoke truth when he told the Kid long since that a worse time awaited him as Nick's friend than as his enemy. And yet he loved Nick dearly as Nick loved him.

"Nick," he said. "I want you to give me a hand wi' the Kid. I know you're straight—straight as a die; but the Kid's a racketty young beggar, an' you never know when he'll fly off at any sort o' angle at all. You wouldn't notice this, very likely; but the Kid is developing pretty quick, an' he's developin' in all directions at once."

He paused, for the throbbing in his temples sickened him.

Nick spoke hardly.

"He's got ter grow up an' take his chances like the rest of us."

"Yes. An' a man who hasn't sweated a bit under temptation isn't a man. He's a lop-sided half-bake, an' he can't make a straight course any more than a

bucket rollin' downhill. He don't know himself, for he's never learned to tackle life square. He doesn't know if he won't peter out dead when things git down to work on him. I don't want the Kid to be like that. . . ."

Again the gasping, painful voice halted. Nick did not turn.

"You take a mighty int'rest in that bloomin' Kid," he said curtly.

"I remember the first night I saw the poor little beggar. He wanted cuddlin' if ever any one did. He had pluck then. But . . . he's got a . . . a sight more of it than I thought . . . thought . . ."

"You shut up, Jim. You're not fit to talk."

"I will. But I mightn't see you again for a week or two. I want your word that you'll look after the young beggar a bit, Nick."

"I can't. He's big enough to look after himself. An' I ain't got the time."

"It wouldn't take much time," said Jim, struggling for connected thought, and half-puzzled at the desire that drove him to speak now—now when the dizzy sickness of the sunstroke seemed to take the last inch of strength from him. "Not much time ; but—I know you drink . . . and gamble, and—and that sort, old man, an' I'm not askin'—askin' to interfere in your private life. Don't think it. But—just don't let the Kid into those games, Nick. He's a fine little piece of goods ; but he's too young for what a man can stand. An' I know you're goin' the pace pretty well."

Nick ran his tongue along his dry lips. He understood Jim well enough to know that there was suspicion behind the entreaty, and he understood that it was necessary to allay the suspicion at once.

"Don't you fret, you cluckin' old hen," he said lightly. "I'll look after yer ducklin'."

"Straight dinkum?"

It was the old touch-word of their boyhood. Nick wetted his lips again.

"Straight dinkum," he said.

Jim sighed contentedly, with his eyes shut.

"That's ri-ight," he murmured. "I'm afraid of Jack West . . . and you don't always think 'bout others, you know, old man. But it's all right now."

And Nick went out softly, to take the Kid to Cleghorn's dirty little back-room, where the Kid played new and intricate card-games, with the bull-pups sprawling over him and smoke and strange talk and mixed drinks to fuddle his brain. It was dusky sunset when he rose at last, with his blue eyes wild and alarmed, and his legs unsteady.

"That makes t-ten to you, Marks," he said. "And one to Jack and—how m-much to you, Cleghorn?"

"Seven-five-an'-six," said Cleghorn, reloading his pipe. "I'll take it now, if you don't mind. I got some bills ter pay ter-morrow."

"I-I'm afraid I c-can't pay you all that at once," said the Kid, standing up to the men with his hands gripping a chair-back. "I-I didn't think it'd be s-so much. I'm afraid I'll have t-to ask you to wait."

"Most o' the gen'lum what comes 'ere don't play 'nless they can pay their debts," said Cleghorn, tapping his pipe on the table.

"Oh, I'll pay. I didn't mean that. B-but—" The scarlet ran to his forehead and he looked at Nick. "If you c-could lend me something, Nick," he blurted painfully.

Nick shook his head. His eyes could not meet the Kid's.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm cleaned out. Told you you was dippin' pretty deep, Kid. How much have yer got in hand?"

"About five p-pounds," said the Kid, burning redder. "There's my next week's screw, but I owe some of that for my washing-bill. I—I—will have to ask for time, gentlemen."

He straightened, with a swift air of courteous apology that marked his breeding. Jack West looked at him with brows drawn together. He, too, came of the class that is finer of fibre and hotter of blood and prouder of spirit than the ordinary heavy-booted man with the earth that bore him in his finger-nails. Then he looked out of the cobwebbed window, clinking loose change in his trouser-pockets. He knew that the Kid would die by slow torture before he would ask for money again.

There was a short silence. The Kid heard the ticking of his watch in his waistcoat-pocket, and for the moment his heart rose. But the watch was a Waterbury, costing twenty-five shillings last year, and he had dropped it in the river twice since then. Besides, it had never kept strict time after the day when he cleaned out its works with a pin.

Marks got up. He was a little rough-headed man with a shifty eye.

"I'm a pore man what works honest," he said. "An' I'm goin' ter git the cash what I won honest. You're a pretty tough specimen, you are. Think yer goin' ter run a fake like this on ter me, eh?"

Nick stepped swiftly between his threatening fist and the half-dazed Kid.

“Go easy, man; go easy,” he said. “Look here, Cleg; see what you can do, will yer? I ain’t got a blessed beano, an’ I’m owing all I can scrape together already. I’m sorry about this, but I never guessed he was so close up to the water-line. You’ll have ter give him time.”

Cleghorn considered, turning his broad heavy face on the Kid, and chewing his pipe-stem.

“Tell yer what,” he said. “I’ll take your I.O.U. for the lot, Nick. You brought him here, an’ you’ll be his guarantee. An’ I’ll give yer a fortnight. How’s that for high, eh?”

“No,” said the Kid, with set lips and head up. “I’ll s-sign the thing myself. I’m not g-g-going to ask any man’s name——”

“You! Bah! What do I know about *you*?” Cleghorn pulled out a scrap of paper and a pen, and wrote two lines in a clumsy running hand. “Put yer name there,” he said, tossing the scrap to Nick. “I reckon it’s good enough for me. I never knowed yer go dorg on a man yet.”

The Kid’s hand was over the paper first.

“I never asked you to do this for me, Nick,” he said.

“Don’t you mind, young un. I’ll fix it. An’ we’ll scrape up the rhino somehow. There you are, Cleg.”

“My name would have held just as well,” said the Kid, and he turned to Cleghorn with dignity. “But I give you my word that you shall have the money in a fortnight. And I don’t go back on my word.”

The Kid’s voice was clear and steady, with no sign of his usual nervous stutter. Nick stared at the blank sod wall, where a patch of damp was spreading like a slow cancer. Did all evil—physical or moral—spread, as sure

and as relentless, from so small a beginning? He heard the Kid move swiftly, and he crossed to the door beside him.

"Feelin' a bit sick on it, Kid?" he asked kindly.

"No, thanks." The Kid stooped to fondle one of the bull-pups where it pawed at him. "No. Fine little chap, isn't he?"

There was a half-sob in the voice, and it hurt Nick like a knife-cut. He halted, watching the Kid's long hands rubbing over the broad dog-head.

"By Jupiter!" he said, in his throat. "I can't go on with this."

And then Jack West thrust a hand through each man's arm.

"Come on, you fellows, come on," he said. "We won't have more than time for a snack before we're off home. Your shift comes on at twelve, Kid, and you'll want some sleep to take that scare out of your eyes."

"Yes," said the Kid. "Yes, w-we'd best go."

He did not speak again until he stood in the doorway of the long dining-room, staring at the set table with its big dishes of cold meat under wire-covers and its paper-hid sugar-basins, with swarms of flies and ants black about them. Sight and smell of food nauseated him, and his brain awoke.

"I d-don't want any tea," he said. "I th-think I'll go an' sit with Jim a bit before we start."

At this crucial moment Jack West was quicker than Nick.

"Jim's asleep," he lied promptly. "I just ran up to see. Mrs. Mitchell gave him a sleeping-draught, and he'll probably be all right in the morning if he's not disturbed."

“What?” The Kid’s face was suddenly drawn and white. “But I must s-see him. He-he’s going up to Tallangatta on Wednesday about somebody, and he may be a week or more. Jack, are you sure h-he’s asleep?”

“Sure. And he’ll probably get brain-fever if you wake him.”

The Kid stood very still, with his hands hanging and hope gone out of his eyes. Nick laid a hand on his arm.

“Come round an’ have a swig, young un,” he said. “Nothin’ like a brandy straight for takin’ the blues out of a man.”

Over the emptied glass the Kid looked at Nick with grateful eyes.

“I’ve been a f-fool,” he said. “But you’ve been awfully good to me, Nick. I shan’t forget that. An’ I’ll get the money somehow. Jim might—might l-lend it.”

He brought out the last words with an effort and a burning blush. Nick knew what this was costing the Kid’s pride, and, because shame was very far from dead in himself, he made no answer. Nor did he speak often through the night-ride back to Buntree. That patch of damp on Cleghorn’s wall bothered him each time he looked at the Kid riding, boisterous and partly drunken, on his left. Recklessness, and dread, and want of food had done their work on the Kid’s finely wrought nature, and when the horses halted at the tent which Nick shared with Jack West by the river, he flung himself from the saddle, walked in, and dropped across Nick’s bed.

“I’m s-sleepy,” he explained, and slept in direct proof of it.

Nick stood an instant, biting the ends of his moustache, and the hard bitterness of his face in the flare of the lantern puzzled Jack West. For Nick saw his way clear now to the end, and he meant to do that which he knew that neither Jim nor himself would forgive.

"Let him snooze a bit," he said. "I'll git inter my togs an' go along with him. He ain't safe by himself jes' now. We'll fix up the hosses, an' then there'll be time for a bit of a loaf."

Jack West made no comment. He went to his bunk and to sleep, and at midnight he woke to the sound of voices and laughter. He rose on an elbow to see the Kid astride a biscuit-tin, beating out a tune with a slat of wood, and singing in his clear, high boy-treble. Nick was in his dungarees, and there was the queer light in his eyes which Jack West had seen there once when he faced three half-maddened Arab camel-drivers on the sandy wastes out West.

"Come on, Kid," he said, and lifted the boy with a hand under his arm. "I'm goin' down ter the old *Star* with yer to see as you don't feed yerself into the furnace 'stead o' coal. Are you ready?"

"T-thanks, Nick; you are a good one," said the Kid, staggering to his feet. "Hooray; who cares what's goin'—hap-hap-happen in a for'night? You're all right, 'n I'm aw right . . . 'n ev'y thing'n the garden's lovely."

"O' course. That's the way ter look at it. No; you can't have that bottle now. Wait till you git aboard. Look out where you're goin'."

He thrust the bottle into his shirt-front, and turned to Jack West with a queer smile yet in his eyes.

"So long, Jack," he said. "If the Kid ain't up to

work, I'll take his shift an' git Doran along for a trick. You'll find me there when you come, anyway."

Jack West nodded. And some unknown impulse brought him from his bunk to watch the two make out across the little clearing to the narrow river-track. The talk of the river-waters, and the rustle of the leaves in the night, and the far low sigh of the wind were all sad—even sadder than the Australian bush is on each silent night of its life. Jack West shivered a little in the heat.

"Nick has got him now," he said. "Got him in a vice, and he won't let go. I don't know the game; but Nick knows it, and there's no man can make a better bluff when he feels like it."

He turned back, kicking the slat of wood where it lay on the earth-floor.

"It's come to pull devil pull baker now," he said. "Jim of the Ranges can see farther into the distance than most men, but I shouldn't wonder if Nick had fixed a blind there, too, in some way. It was well for us that Jim was out of the running to-day. Cleghorn was neat . . . very neat. But how is Nick going to do it?"

The Kid did not know until it was done and he woke through the next mid-day to see the sunlight crawling on the bare wall of his little room in Buntree, and to hear the rattle of carts in the street. He was sick and giddy, and his eyes ached in the glaring light until he turned his face on the pillow with a groan.

"I th-thought it was Jim got hurt," he murmured. "I wonder . . . where's Jim?"

A light, quick step sounded in the room; a hand came on his forehead, and Nick stooped over him.

"Hillo, Kid," he said cheerfully. "Goin' to sleep the clock round, eh? You're a gay spark, you are. I brought Barnes up ter see how you was doin', for you did play old Harry down at the dredge an' no mistake. I won't take you amusin' yerself to Cleghorn's again if I know it."

"Cleghorn's?" asked the Kid feebly.

Then memory came in a blinding flash that made him wince. He sat up, heart sick and body sick, fumbling with his pyjama buttons.

"I d-don't remember going to b-bed," he said.

Barnes chuckled, dropping in a lump on the one cane chair by the little wash-stand.

"Shouldn't wonner ef yer didn't," he said. "D'yer remember the way yer carried on down at the dredge? Nick an' me was mortal scared as yer'd git inter the machinery, seein' as we couldn't be watchin' yer all the time."

"I don't . . . yes, I do, a little. Did you put me to bed, Nick? You are a good sort. I . . . w-was I drunk again, Nick?"

"'Fraid yer was, Kid. Don't worry. That was part my fault. I shouldn't a-took you to Cleg's. Best git up, hadn't yer? It's frightful hot in here."

"Yes. Yes, I suppose so," said the Kid.

He stood up and reached for his trousers. Something small and dull dropped from the pocket with a thud to the floor, and Barnes stooped, picking it up. It was a gray canvas-bag with the mouth open, and gold-dust and little flat water-worn nuggets spattered from it over the strip of drugget by the bed. The Kid rubbed his eyes, staring at the patch of sunlight on the gold. Nick sprang for the door and locked it. Then he came

back with the impetuous fling-back of his tall body that the Kid knew well.

"So that was your little game last night, Kid," he said.

The Kid sat back on the bedside.

"Where did it come from?" he asked.

Barnes burst into a coarse laugh.

"Oh-ho; good enough! Where did it come from, eh? Where——"

"Shut up," said Nick swiftly. "D'you want folk to hear. Well, Kid?"

"I—I don't know," said the Kid blankly.

Nick laughed, standing before him with hands in his pockets.

"See here, Kiddie," he said. "You needn't funk Barnes an' me. There's quite a many fellers along the rivers don't mind doin' a director now an' then—jus' in the way o' business. We works hard enough for it. An'—well, knowin' as you're about on yer beam-ends, Kid, we won't be rough on yer——"

"But I never took it," cried the Kid, and Barnes chuckled.

"Tell that ter Hartmann—or ter Jim Kyneton," he said.

The Kid shivered.

"They needn't know," he said. "I—I—how could I have taken that from the dredge, anyway?"

"Give us another," said Nick. "You remember us washin' up two old tables that had to be mended last week? Harrop told me ter put the wash ready for him ter mix in wi' the rest, an' I forgot an' left it in the swab locker. Yer must a-found it there last night, Kid."

"Oh, my God!" said the Kid, and covered his face with his hands.

"Well, I don't much blame yer," said Nick, speaking kindly. "It makes mighty little diff'rence ter the shareholders, an' it makes a mighty big diff'rence ter you an' me. Looks somethin' like ten pound in that lot."

"But I can't use it," cried the Kid, starting up. "I must put it back. It—it isn't mine."

Nick cleared his throat.

"See here, Kid. How'm I goin' ter meet that I.O.U. in a fortnight? I haven't a brown, an' you're not much better."

"But I can't——"

"You got to think o' me. I'm sorry; but with old Cleg it's pay or gaol, an' I can't pay. What are you thinkin' o' doin'?"

"I—I thought Jim——"

The Kid's ignorance of law was utter, and Nick had known it when he began moving his men for this game.

"Jim can't come inter it now. You've stole, an', as he's a trap, he's bound ter take notice o' that. If you go ter him he's dead-certain ter nail yer, Kid. He can't help himself."

"But i-if I put it back——"

"That's no good," said Barnes, speaking suddenly. "I'm in this game, an' I'm not goin' out without a *consideration*. You give me my share o' that, or I'm goin' ter split on yer ter Hartmann an' Jim. Reckon yer'll be in the soup all right then, eh?"

For a moment the Kid stared wildly. Then he dropped his head down on the pillow with something like a sob.

“Nick,” he said weakly.

Nick turned to Barnes, and there was not the triumph in his eyes that Barnes expected to see there.

“Git,” he said curtly, and locked the door behind Barnes’ retreating footsteps.

Then he came back to the Kid with slow, dragging feet. It was not Nick’s usual walk, but the Kid did not heed. Physically and mentally he was incapable of action just now. Nick halted, looking down on the fair rough head and the heaving shoulders. That patch of damp spreading on Cleghorn’s wall was strangely real to him. Then he spoke.

“I reckon the game’s up, Kid. Barnes won’t keep his mouth shut ’nless I make him. An’ I got ter have money ter make him. You hand me over that dust an’ yer five pounds, an’ all yer can spare out o’ yer weekly screw till we’re square, an’ I’ll sort things up for yer. There’s no other way out as I can see. You leave it ter me, Kid.”

His voice seemed to come from very far off, and the Kid answered shakily :

“You’ve been jolly good to me . . . and—and if I c-can’t ask J-Jim I’m afraid I couldn’t g-get the money in time. So . . . but I never meant t-to steal it, Nick.”

“Glory,” said Nick lightly ; “what’s pinchin’ a bit o’ gold-dust ? Fellers do it every day o’ the year—an’ small blame ter ’em, either. Well ; that’s all right. An’ no one need ever know. It’s a deal then, eh ? ”

“It’s a deal,” said the Kid, and closed eyes and brain with relief against further understanding.

CHAPTER VI

“IT IS MY ORDER”

SOUTAR was jealous of each caller at the “Bushman’s Rest”; but he was something more than jealous of Jim, and Jim knew it. Soutar hated Jim’s cleanliness of body and soul; he hated the big strong limbs, and the genial voice and smile that brought the children running to cling about his knees. No children loved Soutar; no men came to him for help; no mothers trusted him with the handling of their wild, half-grown lads. But there was more yet. Behind Jim’s careful schooling of himself Soutar guessed where his heart still lay, and he watched him with the silent cunning of an old dog-fox.

And Roseen handled the two cleverly as a Chinaman handles his chopsticks; using them together or alternately at her will; until Soutar’s jealous anger slid away before her gentle speech and the droop of her sweet eyes, and Jim went out to the dark gully alone, there to fight himself and his temptation, and to crush down his growing dislike of Soutar. For the hope that he might sheet one of Soutar’s many sins home to him would not die in Jim, and the knowledge that this hope was there shamed him, and troubled the honour of his soul.

“He’s no good,” he told himself again and over again. “I could leave her if he was—perhaps. I

could make myself do it. But if I had a chance to show him up so as to save her. . . .” He crushed a handful of gum-leaves and flung them from him. “That talk’s rotten,” he said. “I want to show him up so as to win her. That’s the bed-rock truth. I’m not as fine a chap as folks think me. I’m not as fine a chap as I used to think myself. Roseen, Roseen, I don’t know how you caught me, or why you did it; but I know that you haven’t let go, an’ I don’t reckon you ever will.”

There were more whom Roseen would not let go. Whilst she played cup-and-ball with the souls of three men, she found time to torment Lone Sutton, until his jolly outlook on the world began to dim and Black George, who worked with him on Binder’s Farm, asserted loudly his intention of getting another mate.

“You’re shook on her yourself,” said the disgusted Lone, and Black George turned scarlet.

“Bet yer life,” he said. “Shook ter pieces. I was shook first pop. But we’ll play this square, Lone. Soutar’ll git the go soon enough, an’ then you an’ me’ll take it on tergether. Tergether, mind. You *an’* me.”

“Right-o,” said Lone. “An’ we’ll show her the way ter git shut o’ Soutar.”

This intent brought them to the bar-parlour door on the next Friday morning with a horse for Roseen to ride. They sent in a message by Bignonia, and Roseen, peeping down on them through the muslin curtains of her window, turned on Bignonia with a little cooing laugh.

“Me?” she said. “Why do you suppose they want me, Bignonia?”

“I don’t suppose as there’s a young feller about here what doesn’t,” said Bignonia, in ungrudging admiration;

and Roseen laughed again, running down the backstairs, light-foot. By the outer yard door she came upon a clumsy young splitter from the Bracken, who had stumbled round to the kitchens by mistake, and a sudden thought flashed through her, softening her eyes. The boy stared on her without attempt at speech, and Roseen understood the tribute. Her smile dazzled him.

"Come round to the dairy and have a glass of milk," she said. "Will you?"

"I—I d-don't mind," stuttered the boy, staring still.

She led through the arch of dripping bougainvillea, purple-red and thick as blood-gouts, passed into the dairy, and brought him a glass of new milk where he sprawled in at the window. He took it with awkward hands that spilled half, and Roseen smiled again. The boy's face was red-brick, and his hands and wrists were red-brick; his hat was thrust back on a thatch of light hair, and vulgar ignorance showed in each movement and word. But any tool served Roseen when she chose. She filled herself a glass and came over to him, sipping daintily, and looking at him with pretty puckered brows.

"You haven't always lived up at Bracken, have you?" she asked. "I should think you'd knocked about a lot by the look of you, you know."

The boy had once been down to the next township for a night. He grew redder, and he made noisy sounds over his glass.

"That's right. I bin knockin' around all right," he gasped.

"Ah," said Roseen, with a little sigh. "I could tell that, of course. How glorious it must be to be a man."

The boy's head rose a little. He swaggered.

“ That's right,” he said again. Then he looked her over. “ Must be tough hash bein' a woman all the time,” he volunteered.

Roseen brought the first direct fire of her eyes on him.

“ How well you understand,” she murmured. “ So well that I think I might ask you to do something for me that I only could ask of a man who understood. Do you think I might ask you ? ”

Under those sweet eyes the boy fidgetted and grew dumb. Roseen sighed again.

“ Oh, you're not angry, are you ? ” she said. “ I thought—perhaps——”

“ That's right,” gulped the boy. “ I understan'. What is it ? I'll do it, dead-sure.”

He added an oath to prove his manhood, but Roseen was deaf to it. She came very near, and the fragrance of the yellow broom at her throat was wafted to his nostrils.

“ It is only—I wanted a message taken to two men, and I want a *man* to take it. And you will do it ? Thank you. Thank you very much. They are waiting at the bar-parlour door with a horse, and I want you to tell them to go away. That's all. Just to go away.”

The boy took his breath with a grunt, as though something had hit him in the wind. He scratched his instep with his other foot, and his eyes wandered nervously.

“ Lone Sutton an' Black George, ain't it ? ” he asked.

“ Yes. Do you know them ? ”

“ No. Heered of 'em. Red-hot, ain't they ? ”

“ Not to me,” said Roseen. “ And this is the message from me. Just a little one. You're only to tell them to go away. That's all.”

"Ter tell 'em ter go away," repeated the boy slowly.
"That's all. Huh. That's all!"

He hesitated; then drew himself up, and swung on his heel.

"Right y'are," he said. "I'll tell 'em."

Roseen watched him slouch round the corner by the clump of poplars. Then she turned to the skimming of her milk-pans in preparation for the next move.

The conquest of nations is a mighty game for the men-children of the earth to play. But the woman-child, playing at the conquest of man, finds a mightier, for her soft fingers control both in the grasping of the one.

"Miss Roseen."

Roseen turned, lifting the dripping skimmer.

"Yes, Mr. Sutton," she said sedately.

"Who's that half-baked josser o' yourn we been wipin' up the earth with?" Lone Sutton thrust his rollicking face and broad shoulders through the window. "He said as you'd sent him along. Was you wantin' him chawed up? George an' me's been doin' it."

Black George sloped his slanting chin over Lone's arm, and fixed Roseen with his mournful eyes.

"Sendin' a pup like that," he said reproachfully.
"What'd yer do it fer, Miss Mitchell?"

Roseen looked at them with her delicate head held high.

"You knew he was a friend of mine—and you were uncivil to him?" she said coldly.

The boy would have found a more correct word without going to the dictionary for it. Black George chuckled in appreciation, then looked painfully grave at the suggestion of Lone's elbow.

"Oh, go on," said Lone cheerfully. "What are you givin' us?"

“ He was my friend. He came with a message from me,” said Roseen.

Something unapproachable in her tone brought alarm to Lone. He glanced at George, got no help there, and returned to the attack.

“ But we’d bin waitin’ Lord knows how long——”

“ When a man wants me to ride with him,” said Roseen slowly, “ he comes first and asks me if I will go. He doesn’t just bring his horse, and say ‘ Get your habit on.’ He asks me first, and then I go—perhaps.”

The hatchet-face disappeared. Lone delivered a kick where he expected its owner to be, and faced this east wind bravely.

“ I asks yer pardon,” he said. “ But we didn’t know till last night if he’d carry a lady ; an’ George an’ me havin’ a day off——”

“ I haven’t got a day off,” said Roseen.

She stooped to her work again ; and Lone watched the slender hand and forearm, and the gleam of golden hair that made a light in the shady places. Underbreath he said something regarding Soutar, and his eyes were eager.

“ Could yer come another time, then ? To-night ? Come out in the cool up ter Pan Crik. No, hang it, that won’t do. George’s got ter be over at Quiberie ternight, an’ he wanted to be along.”

No one knew better than Roseen how to run a speech into her own mould. She glanced at him with a smile that brought him further through the window.

“ This evening ? Oh, yes, Mr. Sutton. I think I could go this evening.”

Lone’s jolly face set into troubled lines. He rubbed his hands over it.

"I arks yer pardon," he said again. "But it's like this. George is as shook—George an' me is playin' ekal charnces inter this pool, an' George he can't come along to-night."

"But you can look after me by yourself, can't you?"

"Can't I? You come along an' try! No, blarst it; that won't do again. If ole George thinks as I've jockeyed him out of it——"

"Oh, I see. Then it doesn't matter at all. Only——" Roseen pushed back her hair with a round white arm, and her gray eyes were wistful on his. "I hoped it might do my headache good," she said softly.

"Oh . . . oh, I say. Look a-here, Miss Roseen, I'll resk it. I s'pose I can explain ter George somehow. He ain't fond o' bein' slipped up. But——"

"You think he won't like it, Mr. Sutton?"

Mr. Sutton kicked the wall, and stared at Roseen's little feet. Most distinctly he knew that George would not like it, and he knew some of the terms in which George would tell him so. Finally he said:

"S'pose he'll have ter lump it, then. I'll resk it. You come along——"

Roseen put aside the skimmer and crossed the dairy-floor. She laid her little palms on the window-ledge by Lone's elbows, and looked up into his face. Her very breath was sweet as a flower, and Lone felt his head going.

"Your mate has a very bad temper, hasn't he?" she asked.

"That's a true bill, that is," admitted Lone gloomily.

"And he might quarrel with you if you go back on him over this?"

Lone lowered his forearm until his hand closed over Roseen's.

“He will. But I'll resk it if you'll come, Miss Roseen,” he said.

Roseen drew off with the quick tacking of a little yacht down wind, shaking her skirts, and moving with dancing steps.

“Oh, you silly, silly man,” she cried. “Did you really think I'd make trouble between you and your mate? Did you really? You don't deserve to have me ever go riding with you at all, and I'm not going till your mate can come too. So there. No . . . I won't, not if I have to wait for a year or two years.”

Lone looked at her with his blood heated, and his voice was unsteady when he spoke.

“It ain't in natur that yer won't make trouble fer a man—wi'out meanin' it, o' course. But—seein' as George an' me is runnin' in couples jes' now, I—I can't say anythin' else but I'm glad yer got that much sense. And . . .”—he thrust his body farther in, and a strong, vibrant note came into his voice—“I jes' wants ter pass the remark that you're a bit of all right. There ain't too many gels would go sufferin' a headache jes' cos a feller's mate had a stinkin' bad temper. Thank yer, Miss Roseen. Strike me lucky, if I wouldn't a-gone ef yer'd arst it. But I wasn't keen on havin' a row wi' old George.”

Roseen's eyes followed him with a laugh in their gray deeps as his tread died away on the path.

“No,” she said, half-aloud. “You weren't keen; but you would have done it if I asked you. And then you'd have hated me afterwards. Now—I think you won't.”

She pulled her apron-strings closer about her slim waist, retied them, and twisted the dangling end of tape round her finger.

“ And that galoot from the Bracken thought I wanted to be a man,” she said. Then she laughed softly, going back to her skimming.

“ I think it is just about time I found out what Jim is thinking,” she murmured. “ For I’m quite sure that he doesn’t know himself.”

And this was truth. But love of duty, and willing sacrifices of flesh and spirit, were common to Jim ; and they had laid the trouble in his heart on the night of dusty-smelling gum-leaves and moonlight, when he rode up to a certain one-roomed shanty set far and lonely in the bush and gave greeting to Roper, the splitter, where he crouched in his chair that was made from a cut-down cask.

“ I’ve come wi’ an invitation to a party,” said Jim, standing big and healthy and vigorous on the earthen floor, with Billy cuddled like a bandicoot against his shoulder. “ An invitation for Billy. Mrs. Mitchell is givin’ a Christmas-tree for all the kids next Thursday, an’ I’m wantin’ Billy along. March isn’t the gen’ral time for Christmas in these parts ; but we reckon it’ll have to do its best once in a while, eh, Billy ? ”

Roper grunted, looking Jim over. Betty was the fresh wind of spring, and Nick was the lightning of a storm ; but Jim was the warm, kindly sun, endeavouring to beam without bias on the just and the unjust.

“ What’s that silly rot yer talkin’, Jim ? ” he asked.

Jim explained again, with his head stooped to Billy. And Billy sat up, small and twisted as a wizened blood-wood, and spoke for the first time.

“ G’arn,” he said. “ That’s got nothin’ ter do wi’ me.”

“ Yes, it has, old chap. Hasn’t your daddy ever told you so, Billy ? ”

“ No. What is Christmas, anyway ? ”

Jim sought for suitable words that would fit with his pay and the score of other claimants down in Dik Dik.

“ What would you like it to be ? ” he hedged.

Billy’s bush-born mind was as blank as the wall.

“ Dunno,” he said. “ What is it ? ”

Roper opened his eyes, writhing in the grip of his rheumatism.

“ What d’yer go stuffin’ the kid wi’ them lies fer, Jim ? ” he growled. “ He’s got a bally charnst o’ gittin’ anythin’ he likes out o’ life. Jes’ graft an’ sickness it is. Graft an’ sickness——”

Jim dropped Billy on the sack before the open fireplace, kicked the logs together deftly, and swung the camp-kettle where the fat in it sputtered to the heat. Then he poured in the beaten mess of meat and flour that he had been mixing, and grinned at the man in the chair.

“ You’re wantin’ your tucker,” he said cheerfully. “ That’s what’s the matter wi’ you. An empty man can’t see straight any more than a cross-eyed man can. Look at that kid, Roper. He could do wi’ some fun to take the peakiness out o’ his face. You let him come, poor little beggar. I’ll see he don’t go killin’ himself anywhere.”

Roper thrust back his shaggy hair, peering on the child.

“ Well . . . take him. I dun’t keer. I can fend fur meself fur a night ef he leaves the things nigh. Hey, Billy ; would yer like ter go ter a kick-up wi’ Jim ? ”

"My-y oath," said Billy, digging his sharp chin in his palms and blinking at Jim where he rattled tin plates and pannikins and black-handled knives. "What d'yer do at a kick-up, Jim?"

"Oh, hide-an'-seek . . . an' blind-man's-buff . . . an' kiss-in-the-ring," explained Jim, casting back vaguely to the past. "You'll like them, sonny."

"Don't know 'em," said Billy shortly.

"What?" Jim halted in the hacking off of a lump of bread. "Don't know 'em? My kid, you'll know 'em before I've done wi' you. I'll teach you a thing or two when we've had a feed."

"It don't hurt, do it?"

Billy's tone was suspicious, and Jim's eyes grew pitiful.

"Hurt? Hurt? Roper, what have you been doin' wi' this kid o' yours?"

"I got no time fer foolin' wi' he," growled Roper. "Billy's got ter look arter hisself. That's what he's got ter do."

"All right," said Jim, going on with his preparations. "I'm goin' to help him look after himself a bit directly. Billy, put up that box for your dad's plate."

"An' yer'll do them things yerself? Not only me?" demanded Billy sharply.

Jim grinned.

"Not takin' any chances, young 'un, are you? Yes, I'll do them too. And we'll have your dad crawlin' round after us before long, I'll bet my best tooth."

And this was why Saltire, bushed on his way to Dik Dik from Tarrangabby, and nursing a dislocated wrist as he dragged his horse behind him, heard shrieks of

elfin laughter blowing out of the darkened night. He set his course by the sound, and struggled through the thickness of box and kurrajong and mulga to bring up against the low wall of a splitter's shanty. A square pane of glass shone yellow on the night, and Saltire brought his face close, peering in. Then, despite the pain of his arm, he laughed.

“Jim of the Ranges,” he said. “I might have guessed. How many different facets can that fellow show to the light?”

He had seen Jim last in the Coodye Court-house, stern, alert, and silent. This Jim was coatless and blindfold, with heated face and hair roughed up. He crawled on his hands and knees, growling, and making great scythe-sweeps at Billy. And Billy danced about him on bare skinny feet, screaming like a steam-whistle, with the wide-stretched eyes and the quivering jumps of a child's half-fearful delight. From the cut-down cask Roper watched with new-waked pride on his face, and his rough voice had an eager ring in it.

“Hi! he got yer near as a toucher that time, Billy. Look out, kid. Look out. He's comin' . . . don't yer go off wi' my table on ter yer back, Jim.”

Billy disappeared in a bear's hug, kicking and yelling with joy. Then Jim rolled him over, sat up, and pushed off the bandage.

“Glory,” he said, “that's warm work. D'you mind the draught if I open the door a bit, Roper?”

He flung it wide. And then the laugh left his face and he straightened to the salute stiffly. Saltire felt unwarrantable anger at the change. For this last year had made the two master and servant, and Jim recognised it with scrupulous care.

"May I come in?" he asked curtly.

"Yes, sir."

Jim stood aside gravely, and Billy crept between his legs, with pinched face cocked inquiringly. Saltire bit his lip. He was seeking Jim in Dik Dik to tell him news that would trouble him, and there was not any time to spare. But the pain of his wrist made him giddy for the while.

"My horse—" he began, and Jim nodded, stepping outside.

"I'll take him, sir. There's a sort o' lean-to round at the back."

Jim caught the rein, swung up Billy on his shoulder, and trod out into the dark. Billy patted his face with hot hands.

"Play hide-'n-seek now?" he said persuasively.

Jim pulled the claw-like fingers down, and his eyes were grave.

"Shouldn't wonder if I had to, sonny," he said. "Saltire isn't up this way at night for nothing. No; you can't ride now, Billy. I'll put you on my old girl in the mornin' if you're a good boy."

He went through his work swiftly, with his mind sifting the sins of the men he knew and wondering where he would be called on to strike.

"If it could be Soutar. Oh, if it could be Soutar! But it might be the Kid . . . or Nick . . . or—or maybe it's nothin', an' I'm makin' myself a fool for my pains. Billy, if you're wantin' a hidin', say so an' you'll git it without needin' to pull that brute's tail. Come along out o' that an' git to bed."

But bed was delayed for Billy. Saltire was very near a dead faint on the rough bunk nailed against the end

wall, and it took Jim five minutes to find out why. Then he propped Saltire up, dosed him with whisky from the silver-stoppered flask in Saltire's own pocket, and explained something in direct words and few.

“That wrist's dislocated,” he said. “And I'm goin' to pull it in. Just you sit tight a little, sir, till I git at it.”

“Do you know how?” asked Saltire sharply.

Jim's white teeth showed in a swift smile.

“Yes, sir. I know how.”

Saltire submitted himself to the strong firm hands that put him on the rack of agony promptly, and took him off again, and bore him out where the night-wind blew cool on his forehead. He lay on the ground, feeling the sweat drip from his face, and slowly the deathly sickness left him. Then he looked up at the man's outline leaning on the log-wall.

“Jim,” he said, with vague memory of gentle hands, and gentle eyes and words that had been with him through the darkness of his pain.

Jim moved, dropping on one knee. Mirth and pity were mixed up with the respectfulness of his tone.

“I'm afraid I gave you a pretty bad doin', sir. Are you feelin' better, now?”

“Yes, thanks.” Saltire hesitated. Because Jim of the Ranges was free no more, this thing was the harder to say. “Jim,” he said, “I know Soutar has special reason for hating you now. Can you tell me what it is?”

Jim felt the angry blood heat his forehead. Roseen and his love were very sacred to him.

“Have you got the right to ask that, sir?” he said slowly.

"It's to your interest that I should know. Can you tell me?"

"No, sir."

"Not though I tell you it's to your interest?"

"No, sir."

Saltire moved impatiently

"Let's drop that for a minute," he said. "You and I have had many rides and talks together in the old days, Jim, and we met then on an equal footing. I want you to forget your position just now and meet me on an equal footing again."

"You're very good, sir," said Jim, holding himself in check with an effort. He had given his body to the Service, but not his private heart, and it seemed that Saltire had forgotten this.

"Damn you," said Saltire, half-laughing, half-irritated; "you've got more pride than I have, you Jim of the Ranges. But you didn't consider yourself above me once." He stood upright by the wall, holding to a rough wattle, and watched Jim's face in the faint light. It was a stronger face than he had known in the old days, leaner, and a trifle sterner. But Saltire smiled a little, looking on it. He had no fear of what he would learn from it, though he must learn at once, and in his own way.

"Evil rumours float from nowhere like spiders' webs," he said casually. "But they tangle the thing they bring up against—if you get enough of them. I have heard a good many evil rumours lately, Jim."

"About Soutar?"

"About you."

Always Saltire had the wit to hit his men straightly.

Inflection, movement, and expression lose guard under the unexpected.

“Me?”

Jim wheeled, looking down on him in simple puzzlement and surprise. Then he laughed.

“Reckon some fellows must be hard up for news,” he said. “Is it Soutar’s little game, this, sir?”

“You’re not afraid?”

“Afraid? Good Lord! no. I’ve got nothin’ to be afraid o’. But Soutar will have, perhaps, when I run across him again.”

“It is not only Soutar.”

“I think you’ll find it is only Soutar once I git hold o’ him,” said Jim contentedly.

Saltire looked on the well-poised muscle and brawn of the man, and he laughed curtly.

“You will persuade him so, I don’t doubt. But—it is a big thing that I have come to see you about, Jim. You know that there have been complaints of gold-stealing on the dredges? It has been asserted that you know the men and shield them.”

“Who says that?”

“Steady, man. I don’t say it. But it has got about the district, Jim, and you’re watched at headquarters.”

Jim’s breath came sharply. Pride was searing him with hot irons.

“Will you give me leave to go down to town an’ deny that, sir?”

“No. You are not to deny it.”

“What?”

The word was sharp and stern, showing the seldom-seen steel of the man behind it. Saltire countered as sternly.

"It is my order," he said.

Jim stood an instant with hands shut up. Then he swung on his heel, and walked into the darkness. The sudden horror of this thing gripped him as a bulldog grips the throat. He stared at the faint outlines of twisted tree-boles and waving shadows, and he told his conviction over again and yet again in his heart.

"It is dirty work. He wants me to do dirty work . . . dirty work."

In the shadows by the low log-hut Saltire waited, nursing his wrist. And presently steps came back to him with the spring gone out of them, and Jim faced his superior and saluted. Still Saltire waited.

"I heard your order, sir," said Jim, speaking slowly. "I'll attend to it."

There was silence a moment. Then Saltire said, huskily :

"You'll do. Come here and loosen this bandage. It's too tight on the forearm."

But, when Jim's fingers were moving over the torn strips of handkerchief, Saltire laid his hand on Jim's shoulder.

"Have you forgiven me, Jim ? " he asked.

Jim looked down on him, and the honest grave eyes hurt Saltire.

"I have nothin' to forgive, sir. I'm up here to do as I'm told."

"No ; that's not it. As equals, Jim. I'm going to put you in an unpleasant position ; a devilish unpleasant position, and I want to know how you're going to feel about it."

The shadow on Jim's face lightened.

"That's kind o' you, sir," he said. "I tell you

straight that I'd sooner ride my mare over Govett's Leap than do what I reckon you're meanin' me to do. But I'll do it. I'll do it wi' the best in me if you say so. You have my word on that, sir.”

Saltire stood a moment without moving. The fibre in Jim's voice had unsteadied his own. Then he said :

“ You are doing good up here, Jim.”

The quick smile came to Jim's lips.

“ Does Soutar say that too, sir ? ”

“ Not exactly. No. But—” And then he mentioned the Kid's name. “ He was going to the dogs as fast as a young man may,” he said ; “ and you have pulled him up. Can't you do the same with your brother ? I warn you that you had better try.”

Jim looked away into the night-shadows on the bush.

“ A man knows when he's got a hold,” he said, after a moment. “ And he knows when he hasn't. There's somethin' got a bigger hold on Nick than I have.”

Saltire guessed what this thing was. But the time to tell it was not yet. He straightened, speaking distinctly.

“ It is not only along here that there is suspicion of tampering with the dredge-returns. I have men watching as far as Bright, and beyond it. But you and Hartmann are here alone on the Dik Dik side, and Hartmann has as little brain as the service allows. Therefore, a great deal will fall on you, Jim.”

“ Yes, sir,” said Jim.

“ You have an unusually good chance, because many of the young men of the district know you and like you well.”

“ Yes, sir.”

The words came through shut teeth, and Saltire continued swiftly :

“When I lay a net I want to hold all the strings before I attempt to draw it. And I want to get the net full. I am going to use you as a decoy, Jim.”

The answer came slower and harder, and Jim's outline was tense in the faint light.

“Yes, sir.”

“Soutar comes up to Dik Dik to-morrow,” said Saltire. “That is what brought me to-night. He will say a good deal against you, Jim. Probably he won't accuse you openly unless you draw it on yourself. So—when I give you the word—I wish you to draw it on yourself. And then you won't deny it. Back out as clumsily as you can, and in less than a week you should be able to find out all the men in the district who are concerned in the business. I have an opinion that there are several of them not far from Dik Dik.”

Saltire waited for the assent. It did not come. In a little Jim spoke, and his voice was harsh with the pain of it.

“The fellows about here trust me,” he said.

“I know. That will give you greater power. You have a pull that I can't get without you.” Saltire paused a moment. Then he added : “You will lose your prestige for a while, I'm afraid. That can't be helped. I told you that you would find this hard, Jim.”

“Hellish hard,” said Jim, under his breath.

Saltire rubbed his fat chin with a fleshy finger and thumb. Then he stared at the moon rising red and big behind the low gum-boles. On the roof of the hut a couple of possums were squabbling, and the wind was

mysterious and faint in the gullies and up the curve of the lonely hill.

“Nature means a great deal to you, Jim,” he said abruptly. “It means something to me too, as you know. There are some lines of Blake’s that you might like to remember just now. I’ll send them to you. They end—

‘Each herb and each tree,
Mountain, hill, earth, and sea,
Cloud, meteor, and star
Are men seen afar.’

Rather an interesting idea, isn’t it? Puts us in touch with the universe, eh?”

Jim had been in touch with the universe all his life. But because he felt the need of it acutely at this moment, the words were radiant with meaning and truth. Saltire saw something of the stiffness, with which Jim had met the blow, go out of the big body, and Jim came to him with the old quiet respect in his tone.

“If you’d care to lie down a bit, sir,” he said, “I’ll fix Billy up on the floor. Roper sleeps in his chair. Me? Oh, I can doss down outside. I like feelin’ the wind blowin’ on me when I’m sleepin’.”

But long after Saltire was snoring in the wooden bunk; long after Billy, on his pile of fern and sacking, smiled in dreams over his games of the evening, and Roper ceased to sigh and toss in his big chair by the window, Jim walked up and down in the little clearing before the hut.

Saltire’s command had touched his honour, his private honour, and the cup was bitter to drink. Disgrace, deceit, open and secret shame; Saltire asked them all from him, and, by the law of obedience as he

recognised it, he had to give. The red moon grew whiter, purer as she climbed the sky, leaving the thick sin-charged atmosphere of earth behind her. Jim looked up at length, and the struggle was eased in his face and his heart.

“‘Cloud, meteor, an’ star
Are men seen afar.’”

he said. “That’s good. I won’t forgit that. This will look all right some day, when I see it in the proper perspective. We’re all doin’ the work we’re set to do—me, an’ the moon, an’ the ants, an’ the worms down in the earth. But, O God! it isn’t the work I’d have chose to do.”

CHAPTER VII

CONTRASTS

“ I CAN’T,” said Betty, and shook her head until the sunlight ran on her curls. “ I can’t, I can’t, I can’t. So there ! Don’t say any more, boys.”

She sat on the floor of the old log-hut in the garden, and from the door-step, with their backs to the up-rights and their feet in the mould of the path, Nick and Jim watched her idly, blowing smoke-rings up into the still air. The log-hut had been a gaol once when the tide of men had lapped to Buntree for a season and receded again. It had been a play-room for three children later, and the aftermath of their childhood was around them still in the dusty boxes and the dog-eared school-books and the litter of broken toys in the corners.

Nick chased an earwig up the post with the end of a burnt match.

“ Why can’t you ? ” he said, yawning. “ You haven’t been to a dance with us fellers for ages.”

“ Can’t you tell me something I don’t know ? ” said Betty impatiently.

Jim smiled. It was two nights since Saltire had given him his orders, with only the bush and the possums to know it, and already he felt the strain of the future that he was going to meet. But he had schooled face and manner to hide it.

"Let's see if I can," he said. "Betty, you'll have every man in the place after you if you come to Mrs. Mitchell's Christmas-tree."

Betty flung her head up; and her eyes met Jim's with such a glory of light in them that Jim was startled for the instant. Then her lids dropped.

"Thanks," she said, with disdain. "I don't want so many. Even a comet is content with only one tail."

"I've met a comet as isn't," said Nick. "And so has Jim."

The meaning in the words was a lash across Jim's face, and Betty saw him stiffen to meet it. She glanced from one to the other, and the shadow lying between the two men seemed—a tangible thing—to touch her also. She shivered, as though something cold crept on her flesh, and the quiver of light through window and door darkened and lost life.

Jim noted the sudden daunting of Betty's glow, and he crossed the uneven floor through the bars of light and shade and flung himself down beside her. Since that day four weeks back when Nick had left him, blind and sick, in his room at Dik Dik the brothers had not met. Now Jim knew at the first touch of Nick's hand, at the first look from his eyes, that those four weeks had set them farther apart than any four years had done yet. But not in his most secret thought would he face the possible reason.

"It's nothin'. I'll get it from Nick directly," he told himself; and then he smiled at Betty.

"You come, old girl," he said. "I'll fix it up wi' mother. An' she'll be willin', I know. Dik Dik's not so big as Buntree; but we git up some mighty fine dances there—an' Mrs. Mitchell's worth goin' to see, anyway."

There were more than Mrs. Mitchell in Dik Dik whom Betty desired to see. Stray words dropped by the Kid, a sharp sentence from Nick, the change on Jim's face when Roseen's name was spoken—Betty had noted them all; and with the clue in her hand she followed unswervingly, although pain lay the way that it led her. Longing to know Jim's life as he lived it now was quick in her. She glanced at him where he lay at length, smoking slowly as he tipped over an old play-box and began to handle the contents.

"I've told you the truth already," she said. "But I'll spell it for you if you like. It is too much to expect of the ordinary man that he will develop both mind and muscle, and I have your word for it that you've developed muscle."

"There's more than his word for't," said Nick shortly.

Jim's swift look at her was quizzical.

"Guess I know how to spell it," he suggested. "Begins wi' an f an' ends wi' a k, doesn't it, Betty? You send down to Melbourne for your fixin's, old girl, an' I'll stand Sam. A fellow doesn't have such a pretty little sister to take round every day. Lord! Nick, here's that old horse o' yours we pulled the tail out o' to make fishin'-line; rotten bad stuff it was too." He turned the staring, painted thing in his hands, chuckling gently. "What a row we had that day you were sick an' I forgot to feed him," he said. "I can't ever believe that we three are grown-up when I git back here again."

"You might," said Betty tartly. "You smoke tobacco instead of soap-bubbles, and you've broken all your toys and thrown them away."

Jim's laugh ended in a half-sigh.

"That's right ; so we have, Betty. But I reckon you broke most o' these toys, if it comes to that. And you're breakin' another that you needn't break."

Under his kindly reproachful eyes Betty flushed scarlet. She stooped, sweeping up a handful of rubbish.

"You chewed the leg off this donkey yourself," she said. "And Nick cut the black doll's head off when we were playing 'The Talisman,' and——"

"Here . . . hold on. *You* gouged in the side o' this spinnin'-top because mother gave you a work-basket that Christmas. And this train got into the shape it is through the full weight o' a twelve-year-old jumpin' on it because she was told girls couldn't be engine-drivers. Never mind, Bet ; you'd have made a first-class man. I'm not sure you wouldn't have made as good a man as old Nick . . . an' I don't know how good that is, Betty, an' that's the truth."

He did not raise his eyes, but he listened for the answer keenly. For years past Nick had broken other toys than those lying about their feet ; and more than Jim knew he guessed, and more than he guessed he feared. At intervals through the last months he had gone mining to the depths below Nick's reckless lightness, but he had never struck payable wash. And this had strengthened the restraint between them until it had become acute and painful as the toothache. Nick flung his reply with a laugh.

"There's one or two thinks as Betty's all right as a girl, Jim. Hack, anyway. An' Dick Messiter——"

"Hack !" Jim rose on his elbow, shutting a hand over Betty's where she sorted out a lapful of toys. "Hack ! Is that so ? Is that the lame foot, Betty ?

Oh, good on you, old girl ; he's worth it. He's workin' like ten hundred across at Tallangabby. But—oh, Betty——”

The mirthful brotherly eyes and touch overset Betty. Because of the stronger claims dragging at him Jim had forgotten Betty's womanhood. She was his little sister again, and the knowledge stung her. She sprang up, tossing the toys over him in a shower.

“I wouldn't have him if he was all the ten hundred he's working like,” she cried. “I hate men, and I wouldn't be a man for anything in the world. They're stupider—they're stupider than pigs. It would make me *sick* to be so stupid.”

The flutter of her light dress and her quick feet passed the door, and Jim grinned, combing the legs of Noah's Ark animals out of his hair.

“Give a hand,” he said. “There's some sort o' beast gone down my collar . . . thanks. I hope she is carin' for Hack. He's a real decent little white man.”

Nick looked down on him where he sat, piecing a broken-legged giraffe together, and the boy-action brought back with a rush of memory the boy Jim. He spoke with more heart in his tone than had been there this many months.

“A man or a girl ain't always got the sense ter choose what's best for 'em,” he said.

Jim's dark brows straightened. Slowly he got up, and the two men looked together on the toys their childish hands had shared. For a moment he feared to fire the mine. Then he said gently :

“I say, Nickie, can't you spit some of it out ? Ferment don't blow the cask to blazes wi'out you keep the bung tight.”

Nick shifted aside the rubbish with his foot.

"D'yer expec' me to do all the tellin'?" he said curtly.

Jim's face whitened. But the spell of the broken toys was on him.

"No," he said, very low. "I'll tell you what you want to know. I love her as I've loved her ever since the first day I saw her. I know now that she will never marry Soutar; but I can't say if I will ever ask her to marry me again. I may. I don't know. But I love her. That's all there is to it, Nick."

They stood silent. Outside, in the heat of the late afternoon, a crow cawed from a swaying gum-top and the beat of distant hoofs sounded up on the siding. Nick moved impatiently.

"Well . . . you'll go yer own way, I s'pose, an' I'll go mine."

"Can't we go part of it together, old man?"

Jim's eyes were on him, anxiously, tenderly. Strong in his heart grew the brother-love yet, and he knew that the answering root was in Nick's heart also. Nick turned with a quick oath.

"Stow it," he said. "I can't tell you things now."

Jim's face changed. He drew a hard breath.

"You mean . . .?" he asked, and hit his hand against his tunic-belt.

Nick nodded.

"You've got the conscience of the law ter keep these days," he said.

"And does that mean that I can't keep yours too, Nick?"

Nick shrugged off the hand on his shoulder.

"Don't be a fool," he said sulkily. And then, in

quick fear, he laughed, brushing his glance across Jim's and away again. "No feller can kip another feller's conscience, you silly old juggins," he said. "You know that right enough."

Jim rubbed his hand over his forehead. There was sweat on it, brought by a swift dread. In this great web that Saltire was casting by day and by day how many men would be tangled and pulled under when the fishers of the law made their haul?

"Of course," he said. "Of course. It's all right, Nick. Don't tell me anythin' you don't want me to know. I'd rather forgot how I stood now."

"You stand as you always did," said Nick, turning on his heel. "So do I. But a man can't go spreadin' out his feelin' over another man like he was spreadin' butter on a bit o' bread. It ain't sense that he should."

"No," said Jim. "But just wait a minute, Nick."

He barred the doorway—tall as his brother and broader, and with that tincture of command in body and voice that Nick would never show.

"You promised me you'd look after the Kid," he said. "I've seen him twice since then, an' he's shied off me. You'll tell me if you have gone back on your word?"

Nick's face blackened.

"I'm goin' my own way," he said.

"It looks like it. But the Kid is not goin' your way if I can help it. I only want to know one thing of you. Have you gone back on your word to me?"

It was the first direct conflict, and it hurt both men more than they had guessed. Nick's eyes glanced restlessly and his hands twitched. Jim stood unmoving, and his look was very steady.

"Have you?" he asked again.

"Yes. I won't tell you anythin' more, damn you."

Jim stepped aside. In the flood of yellow light pouring through the door the crow's-feet showed round his eyes, and their expression was tired.

"I'm not askin' any more," he said. "But I had the right to know that. It's the first time you have lied to me, Nick, an' it's the first time you have cursed me. I reckon it'd be better for the both of us if we wiped to-day off the slate an' began again, wouldn't it?"

Shame and pain flared together with sudden anger in Nick.

"Wouldn't it?" he mocked. "Wouldn't it? So's you could go nosin' round an' findin' out things you ain't meant ter know. No, it wouldn't, an' that's straight."

He went through the garden with quick heels spurning up the loose shingle, and Jim followed slowly, with stooped shoulders and head low. The breach had come, but their love was not dead. Neither in Nick nor in himself was the brother-love dead. He knew it as surely as he lived—as surely as he knew that the breach would not be bridged for many long days and wakeful nights. The garden was drowsy with the hum of the big velvety bees in the honeysuckle and baronia, but the buzz of a wasp or a native bee jagged the sleepiness now and again with the sharp note of a threat. The vivid contrasts of ease and strife showed in Nature as they show in a man's heart. Jim saw and recognised, with hazy remembrance of Saltire's words:

"Each herb and each tree . . .
Are men seen afar."

The pale white of the orange-bloom drooped in the heat, and the scarlet of the poinsettias made flame behind it. The busy black ants ran from under his tread, and, far to the south, one lazy white cloud lay asleep on the blue of the sky. Beyond the verandah-trellis sounded Betty's girlish laughter, and deep man-tones that Jim knew for Hack's. His face cleared a little.

"I'm glad the old chap's come," he said. "He's a real decent white man, is Hack."

Hack was dusty and travel-worn. Sudden business had flogged him over the long winding track with haste behind him, and hard work had thinned his flesh. But he sat on the verandah-edge with content bubbling in him, and stirred his tea in an energy that overflowed it whilst he watched Betty with bright, round, alert eyes.

Katherine's long fingers shut over Jim's as he brought her cup.

"Well, son?" she said, and smiled in his eyes, reading the trouble there before it was hid.

Jim shook his head, smiling back. By the quick understanding between them he knew that she had seen.

"Don't you, mother," he said. "It's only the conscience of the law. Nick's been tellin' me that I've got that to keep now, an' it's weighin' a bit heavy."

He sat back against the verandah-post, and Sinner climbed over him in eager delight; for he saw too little of Jim in these days, although, even as Betty, the old dog had been much to Jim once. Katherine's eyes passed from her son to Nick, and rested there. Nick had gone beyond her understanding into his own world of fiercer life; and her look clung to him, noting with

love's insight the careless, half-defiant eyes, the deep lines of the good-looking face, the laugh that was not ringing true.

"I have lost him," she said in her heart. "But there is Jim always. I can always trust Jim."

And she did not know that at this time Jim could not trust himself.

Betty's voice rose in spirited argument with Hack.

"I don't believe it," she cried. "I don't believe a word of it. Manners don't make the man. They make the intolerable fool. I've seen that more than once."

"She's thinkin' o' Dick Messiter," explained Jim, pushing Sinner aside. "He is a bit of a toff, Betty. A quiet-goin' old Hack's better than a race-horse for a long journey every time."

The twinkle in his eyes stung Betty. But she would not show it, and she did not know the brave heart that had called up laughter in him just now. She leaned her head against Katherine's knee and shut her eyes.

"Of course," she said. "In the same way that a big egg is better than a little egg, and a big cheque is better than a little cheque, and a big fool is better than a little fool, and a big pain is better than a little pain, and a——"

"Oh, shut up," said Nick, exploding into unwilling laughter.

"And a big thirst is better than a little thirst," droned Betty. "And a big oath is better than a little oath, and a big——"

"Betty!" Jim grabbed her ankle. "Betty, you mad alarm-clock. Stop it!"

" . . . Spree is better than a little spree, and a big——"

"Glory! Is she goin' to run down to-night?" demanded Nick.

" . . . Lie is better than a little lie, and a big——"

Nick came across and lifted her under the arms.

"Betty!" he shouted.

Betty sat up and blinked.

"I'll have another cup of tea, please," she said composedly.

Nick sat back on his heels and regarded her.

"We'll have you up at Dik Dik, Betty," he said.

"You'll make the fellers madder'n ever Roseen does. Mother, this kid is comin' up to Mrs. Mitchell's bun-worry nex' week."

"Betty——" Katherine's glance met Betty's and Betty flushed. Her eyes were lit and her lips a scarlet line.

"I'd like to go," she said deliberately.

Then she felt Katherine's look pass her to Jim, where he lay flat with the old dog pulled up on his breast, and her skin burnt redder. With never a word spoken Katherine understood so much.

"Has Mrs. Mitchell asked you, Betty?"

Jim spoke indistinctly, for Sinner was licking his face.

"She'd jump at the chance, mother. She's wantin' folk to help keep the kids lively, an' I guess Betty can do her whack at that. An' we're havin' a hop after. You let her come, mother. I'll fix it, an' I'll hunt up some fellow to take her along. The Kid, most like . . . or Nick. Will you, Nick?"

Voice and look were carefully casual. Nick met him on the same plane.

"Can't say. You'd best rope in the Kid. He's sure to be goin', an', if mother'll let him come ter tea an' do a bit o' worshippin' of her, he would ride all night for payment."

"That's not very civil to me," said Betty lightly. "Besides, he hasn't been near us for almost six weeks."

Jim glanced up quickly, with brows drawn together, and Katherine said :

"He may not care to come. You had better give it up, dear."

"Oh, auntie—" Betty came across swiftly, falling on her knees at Katherine's feet. Her hands were clasped, and behind the roguish merriment of face and voice was a deeper, stronger note.

"I'm Marie Antoinette on the scaffold," she said. "I'm Jane Seymour, or a praying-mantis, or anything else that says prayers. I'm the Torrey-Alexander Mission if you like. But—I want to go."

There was a sense of charged intensity about her. Jim watched, with something strange stirring in him. Roseen knew no passionate heights and depths. The child Betty had known them in part; the woman Betty knew them more fully. But Jim did not know the woman Betty. For the first time this realisation came home to him, and it hurt him. Then he thrust it aside. Roseen was the one woman most surely. All others were but shadows or smoke-drift or light clouds blown by on the breath of a man's fancy.

"It's only you for me, my girl," he said in his heart. "Whether I ever win you or not, it's only you. You're playin' wi' Soutar, an' maybe you're playin' wi' me. But you've got me fast, an' you know it."

Mrs. Mitchell knew it also, and in Roseen's room at

the "Bushman's Rest" she said so at that moment. And Roseen sat on the bedside, with her yellow hair loose about her, and drew the strands over her bare arms, and smiled. Mrs. Mitchell was heated and angry. She had come direct from her bi-weekly quarrel with Soutar, and Soutar's lagging feet down the sidewalk sounded in her ears yet.

"Come, come, pet," she said sharply. "You've played the giddy goat long enough. You began it just to joke the other fellows, and you have had your fun. To see Lone Sutton takin' his drinks these days jes' makes my heart sore—the innercent sweeting. I was never that crool to a man. You haven't got an ounce of sentiment in you, Roseen."

"If I had as much as you," said Roseen serenely; "the 'Bushman's' would be bankrupt long ago."

Mrs. Mitchell tittered, clinked her bracelets, and curved her neck sideways at the glass.

"My heart is ever young, my love," she said. "And when the boys will come roun' like bees roun' a flower—well, I ain't got the croolty to be hard on the darlings, an' that's a fact. But about Jim Kyneton, now. Soutar's bin tellin' me a lot against him. He says I'll have to clear him, Rosie. He says as Jim ain't straight."

"Does Soutar think he knows what straight means?" asked Roseen, watching the gleam of her white flesh through the gold.

"Now, now. There you go. Allers jeering at Soutar. And the poor lamb can't help himself. God or the Devil made him, an' they're responsible. That's what I allers says."

"I know you do. But you don't seem able to find

out which is responsible. You're not going to say one word to Jim, mother."

"My sweetest love, if Jim Kyneton——"

Roseen stood up, throwing back her hair. And Mrs. Mitchell forgot her words in new appreciation of her daughter's beauty. Daily Roseen was a surprise to her, and she nodded with approval at the rounded limbs, white and dimpled as a child's, at the clear starry eyes and the delicate bloom of the cheek half-hid by the yellow hair.

"I will say this for you, Roseen," she said. "I've every reason to be satisfied with your looks. Algy takes after his father, poor little freckled dove——"

"Mother, if Soutar says anything more against Jim, send him to me. But don't you speak to Jim yourself. Did any one hear what Soutar said?"

"I did. I——"

"You! You're always thinking of yourself. You'll want to answer for the whole earth on Judgment Day. Was any one in the bar except Soutar?"

"Only Jack West. Rosie, the sweet cherub brought me that fern——"

"Jack!" Roseen wheeled on her sharply. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"There's no hurry. He's stayin' the night. Jim an' the Kid came up. That poor pet is drinkin' more'n he orter, Rosie. I'm afraid he's in love with—with somebody."

"It's all good for trade," said Roseen, speaking with her mouth full of hairpins. "Mother, you go down and tell Jack I'll be there in ten minutes. Tell him I'm going up to Black's Creek for ferns, and he's to come and carry the basket."

Mrs. Mitchell swung the door doubtfully, and her high strident voice was nervous.

“Rosie, love, if Soutar comes back——”

“Never you mind Soutar. I can manage him and half-a-dozen men besides him. I do wonder what makes you so soft, mother. You look as hard as the back-door pump, and any fool of a man can twist you round his little finger. Now, don’t forget to tell Jack.”

But it was a full half-hour before she came down the stair, with demure hat-strings tied under her chin and eyes calm and tender as a saint’s. Jack West had fretted himself beyond civility. He was unshaven, and his cheeks were hollow, and he took the basket from her with hasty irritation.

“I thought you were to be only ten minutes?” he said.

Roseen had passed by him to the golden evening light flooding the world of bird-song and bush-scent without. She turned swiftly.

“If that is all you have to say,” she told him, “I shall go in.”

“No. No. For God’s sake, no. Roseen, I want to ask you——”

“When I’m ready to be asked I will tell you,” said Roseen sweetly, and gathered up her skirts. “Are you coming to the Christmas-tree next Wednesday, Jack?”

“Can’t answer for myself these days,” said Jack West, with a curt laugh that had no amusement in it. “May I carry your trowel?”

Roseen flashed one glance at him from under the drooping hat.

“You’re giving yourself away every day of your life, Jack,” she said. “Jim Kyneton isn’t as clever as

I think he is if he doesn't guess that you're up to something."

"Jim Kyneton! It's Jim I want to speak to you about. You see more of him than any one else, and you'll know . . . how much has he guessed, Roseen?"

"How can I tell?"

"You could find out."

Roseen smiled, stepping down the slope through the low mulga to the chattering creek below.

"Perhaps—if I wanted to," she said.

Jack West crushed the scrub aside and caught at her left hand.

"You're the only one who can do it," he said, and his breath came unevenly. "Saltire is tracking us, and he's put Jim on the scent. I heard that yesterday—when I wrote you that note. But we've got just to sit tight. If we make a move Saltire will pounce. I know him. He's as sharp as a fox. But Jim . . . he'll smell us out one by one unless you can stop him."

"How?" asked Roseen, and looked straight into his eyes.

Jack West dropped her hand, turning aside.

"Don't," he said. "When you look at a fellow like that—he's apt to—to forget himself."

Roseen laughed, dropped on one knee by the creek, and swept up a palmful of water.

"I'm so thirsty," she said, and put her lips to it. "Hasn't it been hot to-day, Jack? Won't you have a drink?"

She held out both curved hands to him, and the mirth and the something else in her face drew him near.

"Take that fellow's ring off," he said, looking into

the rosy palms. "Then I'll be grateful for anything at your hands, Roseen."

She dripped the water out slowly, shaking her head.

"I think . . . it will . . . be Jim Kyneton . . . to take this . . . ring off," she said, measuring her words to the dripping of the water.

"Jim!" He caught her hands, and his eyes frightened her. "What does that mean? Are you going to give us away? Have you told him already? By ——! if you have——"

"Ah, but you know I haven't," cried Roseen, and nodded at him with the merriest, daintiest suggestion of secrecy. "You know, though you are the very silliest boy in all the whole world. Jim likes me, and I like him. And the more he likes me the less time he'll have for—other things."

"You mean——" He stepped back, staring at her. "You mean you are doing this to—to save us—to——"

Her ripple of laughter mocked him, and he knew that he had lost the clue again.

"Don't try to guess," she said. "A man's guesses are so clumsy. A woman understands without reasoning, and a man reasons without understanding. That's just what men and women are, Jack. And you happen to be a man, and I happen to be—a woman."

The half-moment of hesitation, the little air of delighted discovery, tingled his veins.

"Goodness knows what you are," he said thickly. "You're something that hurts a fellow whether he's near you or away from you. But I never knew you cared for Kyneton—that way."

"I think," said Roseen demurely, "that you know very little about me, Jack." She drew off Soutar's

ring and pushed it slowly over a dead stick out-thrust from the mulga scrub. " 'With this ring I thee wed,' " she repeated solemnly. " 'With my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow.' Jim Kyneton could say that very nicely."

Jack West bit his lips.

"If that's what you're meaning you'll tell him," he said.

Roseen lifted her eyes to his.

"I shall not tell him—anything," she said quietly.

And, by some strange intuition, Jack West knew that she spoke truth.

"Kyneton comes back to-night," he said. "He went home, your mother told me. So did Nick. I'm always deadly afraid that Nick will let out something when those two get together. He's too fond of Jim."

"Awfully silly to be fond of any one, isn't it?" said Roseen, and yawned. "Do get those ferns, Jack, and let us go back. I feel so lazy. It has been a stupid day, and you're the stupidest thing in it."

She smiled at him drowsily, and his eyes were curious.

"What do you think Soutar will do when you turn him down?" he asked.

"That's his business—and Jim's," said Roseen serenely. "I am not going to dawdle any longer, Jack."

But Jim had other business before the clash came with Soutar. It was black night when he rode home through the bush to Dik Dik, and weariness climbed the stairs with him and followed him to his bed. The night was hot and very close, and the smell of burnt linen blew up from the kitchen where Bignonia had been ironing. Jim dropped into a restless sleep, hear-

ing the last footfalls down the passage, the last beat of hoofs up the road. Then he started up in his bed with ears and senses alert. A board creaked in the passage without, and his bushman's ear heard the soft pad of stockinged feet.

He sprang up, struck a light, and flung the door wide on the instant. And the light flashed over the Kid with coat off and boots in his hand. The Kid halted, and his blue eyes were frozen with horror. Jim did not speak. But he caught the boy by the shoulder, twisted him into the room, and closed the door softly. Then he said in a voice that was strange to the Kid :

“ You'll explain this—now, if you please.”

The Kid struggled, but Jim's grip burnt into his muscles like clamping iron.

“ L-let me alone,” he panted.

“ What are you doing ? ” said Jim again.

Fear and guilt were written on every line of the Kid's body. His face Jim could not see.

“ Take your hands off me,” he said, in his throat.

Jim stepped back from him silently. But in that silence the Kid felt the cold mercilessness that men said was in Jim of the Ranges. He shivered and stood still.

“ If you will be treated like a man,” said Jim, speaking slowly and hardly, “ you shall answer me like a man. It's no good that has brought you out of your room at this hour. What is it, then ? ”

The Kid bit his lips, for he knew that they were trembling.

“ Answer me,” said Jim.

“ I w-won't answer a trap,” cried the Kid, in sudden fury and stinging scorn.

"I do not ask you to. I ask you to answer a man older than yourself and—straighter."

The slow, grave voice held condemnation in the ring of it. The Kid bit his lips again, glanced at Jim and away, wheeled to the window and stood staring on the dark. Jim followed, and the Kid winced under the strong grip on his shoulder.

"I am goin' to pull an answer out o' you somehow," said Jim. "And, if you choose to let me think you a coward as well as all the other things I'm thinkin' you just now, that's your look-out. Now——"

He launched into a swift, pitiless questioning, such as hit the Kid in unsuspected places and drew from him sparks of fury and violent denials and stubborn silence. The effort exhausted both men, and the suppressed speech strained their voices. Jim ceased at last, looking down on the Kid where he sat on the bed-foot with his head in his hands.

"What you tell me you haven't done I believe you haven't done," he said. "What you are meanin' to do I can't find out, but I'd like you to think of one thing. You are very fond of my mother, and she is very fond of you. Would you care for her to know what you were goin' to do to-night?"

In the faint flicker of the candle on the drawers he saw the Kid shudder and the fair rough head sink lower. He dropped down on the bed, and slid his arm round the bent shoulders.

"If it was my mother here," he said, "you'd tell her because you love her. Can't you believe that I love you too? I wouldn't be kickin' up such a shine if I didn't."

The mixture of humour and deep feeling in the tone,

the warmth of the kindly touch, were too much for the Kid. He hesitated. Then his manhood gave way. He caught Jim's arm in both hot hands, and his head went down on them.

"D-don't go back on me," he sobbed. "Don't. You're s-straight as daylight, and I'd sooner—sooner—oh ! I don't know what to do."

"Can't you tell me, old man ? Or—or could you tell my mother ? "

"No. Oh, I can't tell anybody. I—I—I mean to g-get straight as soon as I can. B-but I can't tell anybody. You'll understand that. And i-if you won't think too badly of me——"

His voice broke with sobs. The big, tender, protecting presence of this man called to him so strongly in his sore need. But honour kept him dumb, as Nick had known well that it would.

"I'm not such a saint myself that I can afford to think too badly of another man. But I must have your word to one thing before I can let you go out of this room. You will promise me that, not now or at any other time will you do what you were goin' to do to-night."

The Kid stood up. And in the tear-blurred eyes was an earnest of the future for which Jim gave thanks in his heart.

"I promise," he said, and shut the door behind him.

CHAPTER VIII

“YOU AN’ ME ARE D——D HUMAN ”

“ . . . AND I don’t believe you would have come now if Jim had not made you,” ended Katherine.

The Kid stood before her bareheaded. In his fancy his soul was bareheaded always before Katherine.

“ It—it’s n-not because I didn’t want to,” he blurted. “ Come up here, you brute.”

The mare ran back on the rein again, and from the gate Betty laughed, wheeling Myall round to catch the red evening light full in his eyes.

“ If auntie was thirty years younger,” she murmured, “ they would make a very pretty pair of lovers, those two.”

She beat the pommel lightly with her whip-hand, humming a little tune that was to have more bitter truth in it than she knew.

“ Adieu for evermore, my love,
And adieu for evermore. . . .”

Her glance rested an instant on Katherine’s tall, stately figure, with the red sunlight in a flood about the hem of her dress, and on the Kid, slim, angular, and nervous of movement as he dragged at the rein and rubbed one gaitered leg against the other. Then it passed across the old low house, where the verandah-creepers swayed as the honey-eaters dipped about them, and a line of

pale smoke rose unbroken against the bush-background to the changing, glowing sky. And in the sky Betty found what she wanted—glory of pulsing, living colour, poured out in the purple-red wine of life that a man or a maid may drink and never forget it again. She drew in her breath sharply, and the song died on her mouth. For pain or for gladness, for good or for evil, she was going to tread deeper deeps and higher heights now. She was going to eat the forbidden fruit ; she was going to find out for her very self if this woman whom she did not know had taken Jim, body and soul, for all the long, long years to be.

The glow in the west mounted higher, touching the quiet east to flame ; through all the tree-tops ran smoky fire as the colours ebbed and flushed again ; a scarlet-and-green lory flapped screeching out of the walnut trees, a blurr of aching light on the eyeball, and Betty brought her glance back to the cobble-stoned yard and the pigeons walking demurely about the Kid’s feet. Katherine was speaking to him in her slow, gentle voice, and the Kid’s skin burnt with his shame.

“ You and J-Jim make me feel b-better when I’m with you,” he said hurriedly. “ But—i-if you knew. I’m not a g-good sort at all, you know.”

Katherine’s eyes smiled at him. Then she laid a hand on each shoulder, bent forward, and kissed him on the mouth.

“ I do not want to know what you are, my laddie,” she said. “ I want to know what you will be. And that is something that it will pleasure me to hear. I am sure of it. Jim knows—and Jim will help you. Good-bye, dear lad ; my wee Betty is growing impatient.”

The Kid stammered and blushed. Hot tears stung his eyes, and he fumbled for the stirrup blindly.

"By God! I will try," he said thickly, and Katherine knew the oath for a reverent one.

And then, for the first time on truthful record, the Kid did mount with his face to the tail.

Betty was the first to suggest a peace-offering as they rode together up the steep track, for the Kid was smarting yet with her laughter and his humiliation.

"I won't tell them up at Dik Dik," she said.

"Don't care if you do," said the Kid hotly.

"We are all sticklers for honesty—in others," remarked Betty. "You wouldn't care to be mates with an habitual liar, I suppose, but you come within cooee of it when you say things like that."

The Kid dug his one rusty spur into the mare's side and said nothing.

"I think I will tell them up at Dik Dik," said Betty.

"If you dare—" The Kid twisted round on her, and his face was a flame of fury.

"Well?"

Their eyes met in challenge. Then Betty laid her whip softly over his knee.

"Just listen to me a minute," she said. "You're a man—or you call yourself one. You can carve your little chip out of the everlasting history of Creation, and all the rest of it. Men are greater than women in the making of the world because they can *do* the things. Women can only sit behind and poke or pinch or pet them into doing it. Well, you belong to the very top of all created things, and—I don't think you're worth it."

"Thank you," said the Kid, and choked on his anger.

“Do you think so yourself?” asked Betty placidly.

“No. N-no. But——”

“We never like to be told we’re wrong,” said Betty, and sighed. “When I forget to put salt in the scones I hate to have auntie tell me so, though I find them just as nasty as she does. So—you find yourself just as bad as I say you are, but you don’t like me to tell you so. That’s a pity, isn’t it?”

“I don’t think so.”

Betty laughed. Then she looked straight before her at the red billows of light rolling down the narrow track.

“Did Jim ever warn you against Nick?” she asked.

“Yes; I know he did. I love Nick. He’s like my brother; but, if I were a man, I would keep clear of him. It takes a very, very strong nature to carry a wild life through to the end as Nick will do. I’m afraid for him often. But he will never drop out like a wreck into the backwater and go to pieces by degrees. Nick will smash like a—a——”

“An egg,” suggested the Kid.

Betty laughed again. But her eyes were grave.

“I think he will. But you won’t. You’ll go rotten like a—a tomato. I won’t let you find your own simile. And that’s why you ought to give Nick up.”

She reined Myall back, bent forward with her hand on the saddle-bow, and looked into his face with the frank comrade-eyes that Jim and Nick had once known well.

“Don’t be cross,” she said. “You’re younger than I am. And you don’t know how horrid it is to be always told that you mustn’t have any opinions because you’re the youngest.”

“Yes, I do,” said the Kid fervently.

"Oh, do you? And can't you find any poor little beast of a boy anywhere that you can bully?"

"Same as you?" said the Kid.

And then Betty flung back her head with such a peal of rollicking laughter that a black cockatoo, sailing past with his yellow underbars showing clear, fled suddenly into the gloom of the bush with harsh shriekings of fear.

"That's one to you," said Betty. "Now we're quits. But they'll call you something else if you don't get me to Dik Dik before dark. Go on, you lord of creation."

"Don't," said the Kid.

Then he blushed and stammered.

"Look here," he said. "I w-wish you'd be nice to me. I think no end of y-your aunt, you know."

Betty's eyes were wicked, but her lips were under control.

"Go on doing that as hard as you can," she said. "Can you do it while we canter? For I want to get to that Christmas-tree before all the toys are off it. What toy do you expect to get?"

"Whatever Jim gives me," said the Kid simply. "He's handing out the presents."

He did not guess at that which Jim would give him before many days; although Jim himself feared it and dreaded it, as he had come to dread more troubles than one in these latter days.

"For the little beggar's game," he said. "Too game. If he's in this unholy mess at all he'll stand up for his mates as if he was leader. That's the Kid all right."

Then he took Billy on his shoulder and ran down the narrow stair with him. And Billy crowed with delight, knotting his thin arms about Jim's forehead.

"My hat," he said. "We're goin' ter have a flamin' ole time ter-night, Jim."

Jim halted on the stair, watching Roseen and Betty go by below. It was two hours since they had met first, but Roseen's arm was round Betty's waist, after the manner of some women to their sisters. Jim's mouth twitched a little. Betty gave of her affections to few, and her tall, straight young figure was rigid under the touch. Then his brows drew down. Betty and Roseen between them carried the suggestion of a fresh morning breeze on a hill-top and an orchid such as he had once seen in the Fern Houses at Bendigo. He spoke sharply.

"Billy, you've got to cut that kind of talk to-night. I told you so before."

"G'arn," said Billy, undisturbed. "That ain't nothin'. Yer wait till I gits goin'. There's that feller—him wi' the brown-sugar 'ead—a measley kid they calls Algy—by cripes, he knows some talk."

"If I catch either of you at it," said Jim, "you'll be spanked and put straight to bed. What's wrong now?"

Billy pitched forward as a flying-squirrel launches into the air.

"Lemme go," he shouted. "Lemme go. I wants that gel o' yourn. She's a wonner. She guv me sweets."

Jim set him right end up, and followed slowly. And Billy cast himself on Betty with a shrill whoop of joy.

"Oh . . . you gel . . ." he cried. Betty stooped with a ripple of laughter and a swirl of white draperies, and Jim saw the bright hair and the tow mix together, and the sudden tenderness on the vivid girl-face. He halted on the last step, watching keenly. There was a hardness in Betty at this time, like the hardness of under-

ripe fruit. But the bloom and the promise of full fruition were quick in her, and in that instant as she bent to the child Jim knew it.

Betty danced down the hall with little light steps, holding Billy close to her breast, and Roseen spoke at Jim's elbow. Jim turned, and his eyes were vague. For the sense of clear, breezy atmosphere had passed with Betty, and here, in the half-lit passage, Roseen's fairness showed faint and unearthly, and heaviness of scent rose from her hair and her dress.

"I haven't seen you for three whole days," she said. "Aren't you going to say anything to me to-night?"

The music in her voice overlaid the noise from the street and the bar. Jim took a long breath that was part pain.

"What can I say to you?" he asked gravely. Then he shook himself and smiled. "O' course I'm hopin' for a dance wi' you, Miss Mitchell," he said. "Betty is takin' my first as she's a stranger here. But——"

Roseen glanced through the half-open bar-door, and Jim's look followed hers to Soutar, wiping his ragged moustache at the counter.

"He told me I wasn't to dance with you," said Roseen, whispering very low. "Shall I?"

That which Mother Eve has bequeathed to all her daughters is often told. But the desire to fall to woman's temptation which is Father Adam's bequest to his sons is less truly noted. Jim hesitated. Then he steadied his voice with an effort.

"You will do what pleases you best," he said gravely, and walked from her out to the moonlight.

By the horse-bars he halted, gripping the rail until his knuckles went white.

“Was she meanin’ that?” he said. “Was she meanin’ that I could make her chuck Soutar if I set out to do it? Was she meanin’ that for me to understand?”

The blood was burning in his throat and ears. He stared across the dried brown grass to the curve of the hill against the starshine.

“He was never a friend o’ mine,” he said. And again: “If I get the chance——”

Down the road a little knot of men stood smoking. Trace Hamwell moved to strike a match, saw Jim, and led the rush to the horse-bars. Here three voices spoke as one, but Trace’s was the fuller and the more eager.

“Jim. I say . . . Jim. That waster Nick won’t introduce us ter that step-sister o’ yourn. ‘She’s Jim’s affair,’ he said. ‘You go ter Jim,’ says he. ‘There’s plenty beside you for her,’ he says. But blest if we ain’t all on us in the same box. She ain’t the sort o’ girl as you jes’ goes up ter an’ says ‘Come an’ have a hop round, Miss.’ No; I’ll be dinged if she is.”

“Did you try it?” asked Jim, with a grin.

“Me? Not much! What d’yer take me for? Flighty did.”

“Oh, Flighty! He’s a gay young daredevil, is Flighty. What did Betty say to him?”

“Huh! You go an’ arst Flighty. He’s gone ter bed ter sleep it off, I b’lieve. Give us a leg up, Jim. We’re all dyin’ ter darnce wi’ her.”

“Plenty o’ time. There’s the tree first.”

“Oh, git out, you two yard o’ pipe-clay,” objected Shon Peters. “She ain’t goin’ ter let us scrape acquaintance permiskus in kiss-in-the-ring if she knows it. Yer

can see that in her eye right enough. You come an' do yer dooty, Jim."

Jim laughed.

"Betty will be sendin' the lot o' you home wi' fleas in your ears before she's done wi' you. Comin' in a shake. I just want to speak to Mrs. Mitchell. Don't she look like a grass-parrot in that rig? Hallo, Mrs. M. How many o' the boys have you been cruel to already?"

Mrs. Mitchell shook her ear-rings and jerked a half-sheet of notepaper from her belt.

"Too late, my love," she said. "Too late. You cannot enter now. Unless I scratch Soutar. Shall I? I near as a toucher did it with my nails just now, an' I will some day. Roseen is cracked, I do think. Shall I turn down Soutar for you, Jim? I wouldn't do it for any one else, sweeting."

Jim smiled slowly. There was a spark in his eyes. In the voice of another woman he had just read the same surrender with a deeper meaning behind it.

"Yes," he said. "Scratch Soutar for me. And don't let Betty dance with him, Mrs. Mitchell."

"My precious child, you go an' teach your grandmother to suck eggs—if she'll let you. But don't you come lecturin' me. Jim, that little Betty is the dearest thing I've seen this century, an' Roseen is as jealous of her as she can stick. Yes, she is. Don't you pretend you knows Roseen as well as her mother does, my inner-cent. But Rosie can take care o' herself. Silly game these programmy-things are. It was that blamed Hard-case Hugh started it." Mrs. Mitchell rubbed her nose with the half-sheet of note-paper and pursed her lips. "They're moral, though. Awful moral. A feller don't do half so much lyin' 'bout forgittin' his darnces

when he knows as the gel has got his name down an’ is stickin’ ter it like a bit o’ court-plaister. No, I will say that for ’em. They’re chastenin’ for young men—the poor darlings. Well, Jim, you give your Betty a good time to-night. Though if I was a young man I wouldn’t be so keen about callin’ her my sister. I would not, an’ so I tells you.”

“There are more than me ready to give her a good time,” said Jim. And when, a half-hour later, he thrust his head through the wide end-window of the long dining-room, he grinned, ending his sentence.

“I reckon Betty’s havin’ her good time,” he said.

Perspiring and breathless in the room-centre Lone Sutton and Warrego Harry pumped gripped hands down and up, gasping out :

“Oranges an’ lemons,
The bells o’ St. Clement’s. . . .”

whilst Betty came down light-foot toward them with a string of swaying children behind her. Her head was up and her hair flying. Laughter was on her lips, her cheeks and eyes glowed, and the frank recognition she had given these men vouched for by Jim rang in her round breezy voice.

“Higher! Higher! I can’t get under. Quick, Polly. Choppetty, chop, chop. . . .”

She passed beneath the arms that desired to hold her and dared not, and Hard-case Hugh spoke over Jim’s shoulder.

“That girl is a witch,” he said. “She’s made even Warrego Harry a child again. Gad, it takes twenty years off a man’s life to look at her.”

Jim’s eyes circled slowly round the men lining the walls. His mouth quivered.

"I wonder does it strike Betty that all the fellows are watchin' her an' envyin' Lone an' Harry?" he said.

"Never. Never. I hope it never will be so." Hard-case Hugh spoke with a shake in his voice that turned Jim's glance to him swiftly. The old bleared eyes met the straight question, and Hard-case Hugh nodded.

"The beauty of womanhood is when it is unconscious of its beauty," he said. "Miss Betty has the beauty and the purity of the snow. It will take a hot sun to warm her. But once warmed she will not freeze again. God send that she gives herself up to a man who is worthy. For she will not give herself more than once."

Jim scratched the paint of the sill with his nail. Roseen's beauty was the beauty of the wax-white orchid which droops to every sun-ray and sways to every passing wind. But he loved her. Most surely he loved her better than any living thing.

Betty came by with Trace Hamwell, and her face shone as though with the sunlight.

"Jim," she cried. "Jim, they've been hunting for you everywhere. We are going to have the Tree now. Come quick. I'll have to hold Billy while you strip it, or he'll break. He has cracked himself yelling already."

Jim swung his leg in through the window and looked down on her.

"Feelin' happy, old girl?" he asked, and the red rushed to Betty's face.

"Ab-so-lute-ly—if I didn't keep losing my hairpins," she said, and turned from him. For her eyes could not lie to Jim although she schooled her tongue to do it. Then she shivered a little. The pressure of Roseen's arm seemed yet about her waist.

Across the room, where the Tree was curtained off, Mrs. Mitchell nodded and beckoned and whispered to Jim with a flutter of ribands and bracelets.

“You’re giving the little angels the packets, of course, love? No, I fancy I see myself tryin’ it. I never can’t even tell Bobby Taylor from Sammy Cook. Is that child in the plaid frock an’ the skinned nose a boy or a girl? Well, I’m sure it doesn’t look much like either. There’s that pea-shooter got to go to Algy, Jim——”

“Mrs. Mitchell, he can’t have it to-night unless the peas are boiled. There’ll be too many folk settin’ out between the dances——”

“I can’t deny the sweet treasure his fun, Jim. It’s no use. My heart is soft as a dove’s breast. I have told you so before. My darling boys, if you will all speak at once—no, Lone; Miss Betty an’ me an’ Jim is runnin’ this show. You go an’ prop the wall up an’ mop your face. You’re not a pretty-lookin’ charmer jes’ now. Git things movin’, Jim.”

The following hour tested Jim severely. Then the Kid, chuckling wickedly, caught him in the passage among the shadows.

“Algy’s been round with his pea-shooter, and I’ve been licking him,” he said. “But there’s enough left for you and Miss Betty if you want a go in to take the taste of those dirty little sinners out of your mouths. I d-don’t consider wholesale love is either m-morally or physically pleasant.”

Jim grinned, rubbing down his ruffled hair with both hands.

“They do show their affection with every bit of ’em, poor little beggars,” he said. “Betty has had to go up and wash. I hear you’re takin’ her home to-morrow,

Kid. That mother o' mine been flirtin' wi' you again, eh ? ”

“ She's the best woman in all the w-world,” said the Kid.

Jim's thoughts leapt to Roseen, and he shut his eyes with a wince of pain. What would Katherine say to him if he should one day bring her Roseen as his wife ?

“ You'll never have cause to think her less,” he said. “ What's that, Trace ? ”

Trace Hamwell dragged him aside, and drowned him with fervent confidences.

“ I never seen a girl like her,” he said. “ Shook ? You bet yer boots. I was shook first pop. I ain't fit ter be found dead in a water-hole on her place, Jim ; but if you think there's any sort o' a chanst for me——”

“ You'll have to reckon that out wi' Hack,” said Jim. “ He's makin' the runnin', Trace.”

“ Hack ? ” The fresh, eager boy-face darkened and hardened. “ Hack Ellis ? All right. We'll see what he's got ter say about it. He ain't here to-night, anyways.”

Up the street Jim heard the uneven beat of flying hoofs.

“ Isn't he ? ” he said. “ He swore to Betty he'd be along before the dancin' began, an' it strikes me he's come forty mile to keep his word. You take care he don't keep Betty, too. He's a nailer when he gits set.”

Nature grows her poisons with her antidotes set near for those who understand to find them. Animals know this many times ; men seldom. Betty discovered her poison this night in the droop of Roseen's soft eyes, and her lingering touch, and the low, wistful tones of her voice. Through the noise and the deadly precision

of the dances, through the silences when Hard-case Hugh gave a recitation that made the women cry and the men shuffle their feet in abashment, or when the Kid, crimson in the face and shaky in the voice, sang “Gentle Annie” and “My Old Kentucky Home” with the room as chorus, the poison was distilled by drop and drop into Betty’s heart, and the antidote was far to seek and not to find. For Jim’s senses set to Roseen as the needle swings to the compass, and Betty knew it, as only a woman knows these things. And because it was not to be told she never might look for her antidote.

Those who take the medicine of pain openly and with healing tears receive also the lollies of consolation. But for those who take the medicine in secret there is no lollie. The bitter taste only is left.

There was a bitter taste in the Kid’s mouth also that night. For, among a secret few at the bar-door, he had heard Soutar cast mud on Jim’s honour, and, because Soutar called him friend, the Kid had held his peace. But he took Betty out to the horse-rings later and flung the question at her in desperation.

“I c-couldn’t give Soutar the lie, could I?” he demanded. “But I felt l-like—like” (here the Sunday-school training showed for an instant) “like Peter denying Christ,” he ended. “Jim’s t-the best man I have met y-yet, and he’s my friend. But so is Soutar.”

Betty stuck her chin up.

“You’re very free with that word,” she said, tartly. “I don’t believe in too many friends. They are the most expensive things any one can buy. You pay for your friendship with just that inner part of you that you don’t give to any one else—with your private cheque-book. And . . . if the friend isn’t all you thought

him, you'll probably find the leaves torn out of your cheque-book and paid away in driblets to the other people he knows. There are lots of friends like that."

The Kid's swift up-drawing of body flung his shadow—a long, black, quivering arrow—to the clump of orange-trees and box against the corner wall.

"I haven't given any one my private cheque-book," he said.

"We never believe in ourselves as much as we would like people to think that we do," remarked Betty dryly.

The Kid beat his fist on the rail. His voice hurried, and his nervous stammer grew.

"I t-tell you I haven't. There's no one here I'd give it t-t-to but Jim. He——"

"Then Jim's the only one you dare call friend," cried Betty. "And you were a coward not to stand up for him. A sneaking coward. Oh . . . can't you understand? Friend is more than a name, and friendship is more than a word. But you've got to *feel* before you can know it."

And here Betty spoke the truth of the world. For friendship is a language, not a word; and its dictionary is the heart.

The Kid flushed.

"I'll s-stand up for Jim next time," he said, and did not know that, even as Peter, he would deny his friend when the test came.

Betty stood silent. The calm wide stillness of the night, with its guarding stars set high on the purple hills of heaven, soothed her as so often it had soothed Jim. And in its greatness and everlasting wonder the earth-troubles of man seemed poor and light in contrast with his mighty inheritance.

The smell of tobacco-smoke blew up on the little wind that ruffled Betty’s curls. A movement among the orange-trees turned her. Then she caught the Kid by the elbow, and wheeled round to the door.

“They’re beginning to dance again,” she gasped. “Be quick. I don’t want to miss one minute.”

Her eyes were brilliant and her head high when the men drew about her again. But Betty saw them vaguely. For her inner sight was watching Roseen under the orange-trees, and the look on Jim’s face as he stooped to her.

Jim had not sought this meeting. He dared not ; and he never knew that Roseen had planned it. She stood, half in moonlight, half in shade, pulling the orange-flowers apart, leaf by leaf, and she did not look at him.

“I wanted to ask you,” she said, “why you are angry with me, Jim ? ”

She stripped away the petals with caressing fingers, and Jim winced. He hated to see flowers hurt, and those soft fingers were hurting more than the flowers.

“I haven’t any right to be angry wi’ you, Miss Mitchell,” he said gravely.

“Do men always consider that when they think of women ? We were friends once. Why can’t we be friends again ? ”

Roseen’s voice was no more than a sensitive wind-breath in the flowers, and she was fairer herself than any flower. Jim looked away, holding silence. Temptation is the lathe whereon a man’s character is shaped, but a chance swerve of the wheel may leave a scar that no later cuts will take out.

“Why aren’t you friends with me, Jim ? Are you afraid ? ”

"Of Soutar, do you mean? No."

"Of me. Because . . . sometimes I think that you haven't forgot me quite as much as you said you would, Jim."

There was a quiver in the low voice. Jim moved swiftly, standing over her. And the heat of his blood showed in his face.

"Don't you know that I've got to forget you?" he said sternly.

Roseen lifted her wistful eyes, with the mystery of the moonlight in them.

"Why? A woman never wants to be forgotten by the man who has loved her once, even if . . ."

Her voice drew the heart as fully as the ears. It fell to silence, and her fingers loosed another orange-petal.

"Even if?" said Jim, keeping guard on himself.

"Even if she knows that he will—will never love her again," whispered Roseen.

The moonlight slid purely over her white neck and the pale gold of her hair. Jim looked at her. Then the throb of the waltz music behind the walls unsteadied him, and his love leapt out to his lips.

"My God!" he said. "You know I've never stopped lovin' you. You know it. You *know*."

Then he stepped back, speaking thickly.

"What are you doin' this for?" he said. "A fellow can't stand too much——"

Roseen was always unexpected. She thrust out her hands with the light on them.

"Take this ring off," she said plaintively. "Please. I'm so tired of it, Jim."

Jim dropped his eyes to Soutar's gaudy brass gift, and his face changed.

“ My little girl,” he said gently, “ you don’t quite think what you’re sayin’. It’s the man as put that on that’s got to take it off. Not me, dear.”

“ I’m afraid,” whispered Roseen, who feared neither God nor man. “ For he says such dreadful things, Jim. I can’t get free from him by myself.”

Jim groped for his words, bringing them out slowly.

“ I knew you never loved him. But you’ve got to be honest to him—an’ to me. He put it on an’ he trusts you. I can’t take it off. Do it yourself . . . or make him.”

Roseen came nearer. She put up both hands against his breast, and their light touch made him wince.

“ He never kissed my lips,” she murmured.

It was utter surrender, and the virility and passionate blood in Jim made him man first of all. And he loved her.

Time had no tide of hours or moments until he let her go, and spoke with his voice uneven through the gladness of it.

“ Give me your hand,” he said, and drew the ring off and thrust it in the breast of his tunic.

“ I will give it to Soutar to-night,” he said. “ And I’ll put another one on in the morning. Roseen, Roseen, you’ve kept me far off for so long. . . .” He drew the small, cool palms over his heated lips and eyes. “ I’m not good enough,” he said. “ Not good enough. Little girl, if you knew how a man feels when he—when he can touch the thing he’s been wantin’ . . . don’t be frightened, darlin’. I . . . I . . . oh, you little, little girl, you’ve knocked me fair silly, an’ that’s the truth.”

When he left her, seeking Soutar, the same mad delight was holding him. He went through the bar, through

the parlour and the billiard-room, with one question only on his tongue.

“Seen Soutar?” he demanded. And again: “Where’s Soutar?”

The shine of his eyes, the swift eagerness of his tread, told the men. Hack Ellis put it into words with a grunt.

“What price Jim an’ Soutar now?” he said.

But Jim, flushing Soutar at last in the kitchen, was thinking of no latter days.

“Soutar,” he said, and laughed, “come up to my room, will you? There are too many folk about here, an’ I want a few minutes wi’ you.”

Soutar hesitated, squinting at the big man through his sandy eyelashes. The candle-light was faint, but in the glimmer of it Jim showed lithe and active and powerful as a tiger. The strength of a great passion was on him, in his quickened words, in his eyes, in his uneven breathing. He was drunken for the time, and Soutar debated. If it so happened that Jim had heard that which Soutar said of him. If it so happened that Jim had come in his wrath to slay. . . .

“Tell it me here,” he said, rubbing Lone Sutton’s elbow.

Jim laughed, hooking Soutar’s arm through his own.

“When I want to be confidential with a man,” he said, “I do him the honour to *be* confidential.” He flung up his head with eyes lit. “Hear those magpies singin’ to the moon,” he cried. “‘The kiss o’ the sun for pardon, an’ the song o’ the bird for mirth.’ We’ll test the two of ’em, Soutar, you an’ me. Come on, man.”

He dragged Soutar up the stair, thrust him through into the room, and laid his back to the shut door,

facing the startled man with the slow grin upturning his lips.

"It's been you an' me lots o' times before, Soutar," he said. "An' we've never had a fair do yet. I give you your chance now—wi' this."

He held out the ring with its false great diamond, moving his broad palm so that the light shook over it. His other hand was thrust deep in his breeches-pocket, and all the lithe, easy length of him was Jim of the Ranges again.

"Come an' take it," said Jim invitingly. "It's yours. Miss Mitchell sent it back—by me. It's near as flash as you are, Soutar . . . an' near as false."

Soutar's lips were dry. But his palms and his forehead were moist. His fear of Jim was parallel with his hate, and the sudden blow dulled his grasp of the subject. Jim saw, and he straightened, remembering Saltire's command.

"Here's your ring, Soutar," he said. "An' if you go near Miss Mitchell again you'll have to answer to me for it. Do you understand? If you'd been an honest man or a decent man I'd be treatin' you different over this. But—being what you are—I've just this word for you. You've done wi' Miss Mitchell for now an' for ever. But if you're wantin' me any time I'm handy. I won't be keepin' you longer. Good-night."

He heard Soutar's stumbling step down the stair, and he pulled off his tunic with a swift sense of oppression.

"I must git into somethin' loose or I'll bust," he said. "An' then I must git out—under the sky. Roseen . . . O Lord! this has been worth waitin' the years for."

With the yellow light of her candle flickering about her, Betty went sleepily upstairs to her bed. She hummed tag-ends of tunes as she climbed, and her tired feet held the dance in them yet. For she was young, and life had been sweet to-night, though the bitter was stirred with it to the dregs. Then hasty feet sounded down the stair towards her, and Jim caught her by the shoulder. His grip hurt, and his manner was strange. The light gleamed on his face, and she saw in it a something that had no part with the Jim that she knew. There was fierce exultation; there was heat; there was a reckless, over-mastering passion that frightened her.

“Betty,” he cried, and his voice was thick. “Betty, old girl, it’s me she loves. Me. She told me so. Betty, wish me luck. No . . . no, by Heaven! I won’t ask any one livin’ to wish me luck. I’ve got it all in gettin’ her.” Then he laughed, looking down on her. “Did I scare you, Bet? I’m sorry, old girl. But—I’ve loved her such a long time, you see.”

His hot hand-grip left her shoulder. He passed her, taking quick steps down the stair, along the passage, where voices sounded yet in the bar, and across the street and the empty section to the rim of the gully.

Faintest dawn was stirring in the east, and sleepy twitter of birds touched the silence to sound and died again. The whole of God’s great earth and sky lay waiting for the stammering thanksgiving of one of His creatures for whom He has made all these things, and the higher spirit in Jim arose and answered to it.

He swung himself down the crest of the gorge to the dark bush where night lay yet, and dropped full length on the springy carpet of wire-grass, drawing long breaths

that shook him. Then some one crashed down through the undergrowth and fell on the grass beside him.

“That’s one to me, you old bandicoot,” said Nick cheerfully. “Didn’t sand yer tracks over-well this time, Jim, did yer?”

The brotherly affection of earlier days underlay the lightness of his tone, and Jim’s full-charged heart opened to meet it.

“I’ve never sanded my tracks from you, old man,” he said. “What are you after down here, eh? Time the or’nary fellow was in bed.”

Nick hesitated, tearing the gum-leaves with his strong white teeth, and spitting them out. Then he plunged into the truth.

“Soutar’s bin talkin’,” he said. “He’d chew you up if he’d got a bigger heart in him. But he’s a white-livered skunk as ever I see. He’s tellin’ what *is*, I know. We all bin lookin’ for it this considerable while, Jim.”

He raised his face to Jim’s, and in the faint light of the breaking dawn Jim noted the line of the thinner jaw and temple, and the deep hollows of the eye-sockets. Knowledge of ill had sloughed Nick’s native gaiety from him, and seared him with more than expiation would purge away. But the old love for his brother held still.

“What is he tellin’, Nick?”

“He’s sayin’ Roseen Mitchell has chucked him for you. Is that a fact?”

“Yes.”

Nick reached out, pulling dead sticks to him and snapping them into short even lengths. He did it as precisely as though life commanded nothing other of

him, and to the end of his days Jim remembered the big, easy figure so like his own, and the long, quick-moving hands still grayed by the pallid light, and the regular snap of the sticks like revolver-shots in the sharp morning air. One low, distinct call of a waking bird sounded out of the scrub. The sound floated down the silence, and Nick spoke, paying down his words with effort.

"I don't care about chaps comin' messin' into my business ; but, if you knowed all the fellers think o' that girl, you'd leave her to the likes o' Soutar. She ain't worth——"

Jim lifted himself on his elbow, and his voice was level.

"I've warned you about this before, Nick."

Nick looked at him with scoffing and anxiety mixed in his eyes.

"There you go," he said half-affectionately. "Preachin' at me time an' again, an' gittin' yer shirt out at a word back. Look here, Jim ; you ain't a fool. You know you're aimin' ter arrive somewheres before you're done wi' livin'. Well, you know as you won't never make good wi' her alongside o' yer. You know it, Jim. You ain't a fool."

The anxious questioning repetition brought a smile without mirth to Jim's mouth. He gave no answer at once. About the two men the shadows sickened and paled, and the stir of the morning breeze made the leaves talk, low and tenderly. The quickening of life in Nature, in man, grew stronger, and Jim spoke by the power of it.

"I'm human," he said. "You an' me are d——d human, Nick. I reckon there's a time in every fellow's life when he means to follow his likin' an' let his con-

science go to blazes. You’re doin’ it, an’ I’m doin’ it too. I’m not goin’ to lie to you, Nick. I know she’s not all I’d like her to be. I know she’s not all mother would like her to be. But I love her. I love her that dear that so long as there ain’t any real wrong in her I’m content. An’ I wouldn’t believe any real wrong o’ her. You leave it there, Nick. You know how it is yourself.”

His face was darkened, and his body taut by that inward passion which Nick so well understood. It was the pull between the human will and the right, and Jim had fallen even as he himself had fallen. This hurt like the cutting of whip-cord into the flesh. For a man may take pride in another man’s honour long after his own is dead.

He sat up, speaking with a vibration in his voice such as startled Jim.

“Don’t do it, Jim. For the Lord’s sake let her be. You claw out o’ this while yer can. She’ll break the heart in yer, old man. That’s what she’ll do ter yer. Jim . . . blamed if I know where I’m goin’ to end up, but I’d blow my light out easy anywheres if I was dead-sure you was shut o’ her till the end o’ time. I would that.”

The words surged over Jim like the waves of a force-charged sea, for he knew the truth of them. But he thrust it from him.

“You’re wastin’ your breath,” he said shortly, and rose to his feet. “I know what she is—better than you think. An’, knowin’ it, I tell you she’s more than anythin’ to me. More than anythin’.”

“You thought a sight o’ yer word an’ yer honour once,” said Nick curtly.

"I do still. She can't hurt them."

"Can't she? She will. She won't leave yer honour to you anyways——"

Jim wheeled to him in a flash, and Nick drew his feet under him, springing up lightly with his tall head and steady eyes on a level with Jim's.

"It's Gawspel truth," he said defiantly.

Jim was white round the nostrils, and that fury which wakes but seldom in a sweet-tempered man possessed him. For the instant he could have killed Nick. Then that love which was to last beyond the death-hour controlled him.

"I think you'd best git out o' this before we come to more than words," he said slowly. "I'm not answerin' for myself much longer."

Nick shrugged his shoulders, turning on his heel without speech. But Jim's hand fell on his arm.

"I must go my own way, Nick," he said. "An' I can't be interfered wi'. If any other man says a word against her I'll know how to meet him. I can't do that to you, an' so you must let me be. I'm takin' my own trail, an' you're takin' yours. I can't see that they're likely ever to run together again, Nick. But we've got to take them."

"I wonder which of us'll land up in Dead Finish first," said Nick, in his throat.

Then he threw the hand off, not unkindly, and swung up the steep face, leaving silence behind him.

Jim flung himself flat again, crushing up the strong-smelling gum-leaves with hot, hard fingers.

"A man doesn't only live to be better," he said. "He lives to love an' to be loved. An' I love her. I love her."

Nearer and nearer the pure morning moved with hushed feet. The clean, sweet scents of the bush gave themselves to him, and the solemn stillness of the un-smirched day laid hands on his soul, stroking the pain and the madness out of it. Above him a kookaburra broke into laughter, gay and heart-whole. Jim looked up at it, and the answering laugh came to his eyes.

“It’s all right, isn’t it, little chap?” he said. “I got to love her so as to make her better. I’m a poor sort o’ rotter if any woman can make me worse. So we’ll leave it at that, an’ we’ll thank God——”

He broke off, looking away. Here, in his own world of bush and birds and tall grave skies above, he knew that he could never thank God for Roseen. Within a roof and four walls and a floor man can juggle with his conscience. Out with the floor and the walls and the roof that God has made he cannot. When Nature speaks, meaning him to hear, he knows that she speaks truth. And Jim could no longer listen to the truth.

He turned and climbed by the swinging creepers to the red eye of the sun above. He took the glorious ruddy light full on his face as he reached the level again, but nothing in him answered to it as it had answered ever since his childhood.

“But I love her—beyond that,” he said, and went back with bent head to the “Bushman’s Rest.”

CHAPTER IX

FIRST FRUITS

THERE was the slight sharpness of frost in the air. On the street sounded the high voices of children going by to school, and the occasional rattle of carts. From the ring-rails below came the jingle of steel, and the impatient stamp of waiting horses, and the broken, idle talk of men. The sunlight lay in a great yellow wash on the matting-floor, and Betty crawled out of bed into the middle of it. Then she tip-toed to the window on soft bare feet and looked down through the curtains.

Her eyes were heavy with sorrow and wakefulness, and with the tears which she was too proud to shed. Since the hour when Jim had met her on the stair she had lain watching the black of the wall turn gray, turn pink, turn ruddy in a vivid glow as the sun leapt up behind the bush-dark hill. But the promise of the morning had brought no glad promise to Betty.

God gave woman intuition when He denied her logic, and He gave man's powers in inverse ratio. For this reason Betty knew more of Roseen in one hour's meeting than Jim would know of her his life long. She knew the little, mean, selfish soul. She knew the cat-cruelty that would play with Jim and torture him, that would scratch with bared claws on the raw soul again and yet again. She knew the soft, purring caresses that came from the lips only, and the jealous mind that would trip

Jim's straight-tramping feet day by day. She knew it all as a woman does know ; and the black of the wall bore in heavily on her heart with its blackness, and the later gray was like the cold gray of death.

"Jim," she said. "Jim. You know what she's like. You do know. You know it by the way men look at her . . . and speak to her. You know . . . and because she is pretty you don't care."

Her face hardened in the dark, and the core of her heart hardened with it.

"Is a man never good and honourable and clean all through ? " she said. "I thought Jim was. But he isn't. He's just like any other man. Betty, you have been a big fool, and, because it hurts, you mustn't be unjust. He called you 'unjust Betty' once. But . . . this is true."

She stared at the wall, where the ugly blotched paper came slowly into being under the hand of the waking day.

"It will be like that. All the evil and the—the badness that is in him she will bring out. She will make him like her. He won't be Jim of the Ranges any more. And he knows how it is going to hurt auntie . . . and he doesn't care." She sat up, with wide, unblinking eyes on a fat spider slung by his web from the wash-stand to the ceiling. "I came up here to find out my own heart and Jim's," she told it. "That's what I came for. And I've found out. I have found out that I love him so much that I could be glad to give him to a better girl than she is . . . and I've found out that I hate him so much that I'd be glad to hurt him and to make him pay for this. But she will make him pay. She will make him pay as long as she lives."

The lump was in her throat and her eyes ached. But she fought the tears that would have eased her.

"I won't cry for him," she said. "He doesn't want my tears or my love or my prayers. But some day he will want all his own . . . and they won't be much use to him then."

The flecks of sunlight danced on the wall, and the noises of Dik Dik roused for the day came up to her. And then it was that she crept to the window and looked down, with the curtains drawn close under her chin.

The morning was bright and clean and clear. Dewy sharpness of bush gave an edge to it, and the regular clang of a hammer on an anvil beat out from the smithy down the road. It was merry and mellow as a church-bell; and Jim, coming out to the new day, bare-headed and freshened by sleep, took it as earnest of a day to be, and whistled stray bars of the Wedding March from "Lohengrin" softly as he strolled along the line of horses, greeting them as mates, and slapping their quarters with a friendly hand.

In the bar and the passage, in the billiard-room where their warm blankets lay yet on the floor, men halted for last words and last jokes and last drinks. Jim neither thought nor cared for them at this instant. The dark of uncertainty had gone with the night, and the morning brought to him love and eager expectation, and all the glory of desire come to ripeness.

The boy from the post-office ran up the street, dodged the heels of an irritable colt, and thrust an envelope into Jim's hand.

"Jes' come through," he gasped. "I say; I did the muscle-grind twict yesterday."

Jim pulled out his pipe and looked down. The light ran fully over the broad, long lines of the body and the kindly, interested face.

“That’s good enough, Sam,” he said. “We’ll be havin’ the gym goin’ next week, I shouldn’t wonder.”

Then he ripped the envelope open, glanced through the message, and crushed the papers into his pocket.

“There’s no answer,” he said curtly.

Face and manner had changed on the instant. To Betty he was a man suddenly brought in connection with some vital unseen force that was tightening his sinews and testing his nerves, and bracing him, body and soul, for endurance and punishment.

The words of the message were few, as Saltire’s words usually were.

“Force his hand at once,” commanded Saltire, and Jim turned to the bar, machine-like, to do it.

Soutar’s harsh voice came out to him, and the Kid’s high, eager stutter, and Hack’s boisterous laugh. He ran his eye along the horse-line.

“Nick’s gone,” he said. “Thank the Lord for that. Well. . . .”

But with his foot on the bar-step he halted. A honey-eater flew by him from the orange-trees, bringing the scent and the memory of the last night. Then the struggle came, strong and terrible and instantaneous. Another day—let Life give him another day to love and to be loved; to be honoured by men for Roseen’s sake; to walk among them with his head up and eyes that could meet hers. His joy had come to him so lately, and if his shame should blot it out. . . . His face whitened, and the deep lines deepened round his mouth. Roseen had tampered with his sense of right

to himself. Now she was tampering with his sense of right to his work, even as Betty had known that she would do. And then something lifted his look suddenly up to Betty's window, and Betty's eyes met his. His look clung; and it was not the dark brows, or the red dewy lips, or the ruffled hair, or the white throat that held it. Betty's eyes were stern and accusing and steadfast, and their honesty gave back to Jim that which Roseen had so nearly drawn from him. He dropped his eyes, braced his shoulders, and walked straight into the bar.

And Betty, huddled down on the floor and burning with angry blushes, never knew what she had done for Jim.

There were some twenty men yet in the bar. Sulky and silent from brief sleep and lengthened drinking, taking their last nips in haste, they crowded the counter, and the spit of siphons and the slapping of the glasses on the wood sounded above the idle, growling talk.

Jim came through them, cheerful, lazy, good-humoured, with his eyes searching for Soutar. He found him, and backed to the counter, half-sitting on it, with crossed feet and folded arms. The wild passion of last night was gone, and the self-consciousness, and the excitement. He was Jim of the Ranges only in the slow grin of eyes and mouth, and the dawdling, chaffing voice.

“ ‘Come, my tan-faced children,’ ” he quoted solemnly. “ ‘Follow well in order, git your weapons ready.’ They’ve all been used once, haven’t they? Kid, you’re too young to be drinkin’ at this hour. A glass o’ plain water for Flighty, Frank. That’s the only thing he didn’t taste last night, to my certain

knowledge. An' fetch Soutar a saucer. He's lappin' his drinks these days."

"What the devil—" burst out Soutar, thrusting his lean, red-eyed face over Lone Sutton's shoulder.

"Don't interrupt him, boys," said Jim politely. "He's better able to talk o' the devil than any man here. Tongue away, Soutar."

"I'm better able ter talk o' you, if that's what you're meanin'," shouted Soutar. "I cud tell things o' you——"

"You couldn't." Jim's tone was serene. "Here's luck, Trace."

Jim knew his man through and through. Among his fellows Soutar could be brought to spit venom if his pride were sufficiently touched.

"Couldn't I? By ——! couldn't I? Bah! You! You clean-livin', church-goin', honest-talkin' man what's livin' a lie an' speakin' a lie, an' eatin' an' drinkin' a lie every day o' yer life. You!"

He spat on the floor in contempt, and Trace Hamwell wheeled on Jim sharply.

"Chew the —— up," he said. "He's talked that rot before. Jim. . . ."

Jim's face was dead-white, and his head seemed sunk between his shoulders. He suggested a man cowering from a blow, and something in the attitude and in the look of him struck amazement to the men about him.

"You can't substantiate that," he said; but his voice shook, and a note of uncertainty dulled the force of it.

The Kid slung a little wiry splitter aside and came forward, staring with wide blue eyes. Jim felt the stare, and fierce hate of Saltire swept over him. He

had given his word to play this game through. But it was going to be more cruelly bitter than he had guessed.

"Sh-shall I posh him for you?" offered the Kid. "I will if you say the word, Jim."

Jim glanced at him and away again.

"Soutar's tellin' lies," he muttered. "I—I reckon it's time I was off. I got to go an' see——"

Some one slammed the bar-door and set his back to it. Some one else reached over the counter and pulled the glass inner door to. Then Jim heard Hack Ellis speaking, and he knew that he was on the gallows waiting for the drop.

"Hold on there! What are you fellers aimin' at? I tell yer Jim's got a right bower up each sleeve an' the joker inside of his shirt. Soutar's chances are nix—nixey, you asses, an' the bottom's knocked out o' the market. Plank down yer aces, Jim. Tumble yer bowers out, man. Come on wi' yer."

Jim lifted himself up slowly. His hands hung by his sides, and his words were faltering.

"There's no sense arguin' wi' Soutar. I—I don't know what he's talkin' about."

A growl ran through the room, a growl of disgust and suspicion. The Kid stepped back with his lips set. Shon Peters took the floor.

"P'raps you'd best know—straight," he said. "Give it him, Soutar."

Soutar's sneer lifted the ragged moustache from the yellow teeth. He had not believed his own word until this moment. Now he understood that by some reckless, unaimed stroke of the hammer he had hit the nail fairly.

"P'raps he would like ter know?" he said. "P'raps

he would like ter know as he's goin' ter be branded fer a cheat . . . an' a liar . . . an' a thief . . . an' a few things more as I needn't mention."

He paid the words down slowly. They fell on the tense silence like blows, and the men saw Jim wince under each as it struck. None spoke when the harsh, grating voice broke sharply. But Jim felt the fire of the eyes on him, and the blood left his heart.

"Talk don't mean anythin'," he said thickly. "You're not worth smashin', Soutar."

"Soutar hasn't finished," said Shon Peters. "Tell him what you have told us, Soutar. Then he can answer to the lot of us. We are expecting it."

Soutar licked his lips. His little eyes gleamed.

"What's the need," he said contemptuously. "Ain't he tellin' yer wi' every breath o' his body, the crouchin' coward? He knows all about the disappearin' o' the gold off of the dredges. He knows as honest men is bein' blamed an' cheats goin' unhung. He knows—well as he knows every hole an' corner o' the hills an' every hole an' corner o' meanness. That's yer Jim o' the Ranges as yer thinks so bloomin' much of. That's him."

Soutar was clever. He did not speak of Roseen. But the men remembered, and Soutar's very silence told.

A girl's step sounded along the passage. Lone Sutton glanced round.

"Hold that there door a shake," he said. "Now, Jim."

The voice was hard. Jim knew well that his manner had said more than they expected of his tongue. He looked on the floor sullenly.

"You've no right to question me," he said.

No man moved. Jim shuffled his feet on the floor and his head was bent. Outside the door Roseen's voice sounded, coaxing. Barty Taylor dropped on his knee to answer through the keyhole. Roseen laughed, speaking again, and Barty looked round.

"Goin' to keep me sayin' my prayers here all day?" he demanded.

"No." Trace Hamwell came out of the crush. "No. I don't guess as there's anythin' more to say, is there? 'Nless you've got anythin' more ter say?"

Jim felt the look. But he did not meet it.

"You've no right to question me," he repeated.

Shon Peters laughed.

"Chuck the doors open," he said. "Let's get out of this. Trace is right; we have nothing more to say."

He went out to his horse, flung himself to the leather, and raced down the street with three men behind him. Jim passed by the others as they made way for him and followed on foot, unseeing, unthinking. He had come through the fire of his ordeal, and the places were seared numb for the time. But they would begin to hurt presently.

It was the Kid who first touched the rawness to live pain. Jim stumbled on him up a grassy road, where he sat in the dust playing pitch-and-toss with a couple of half-grown boys. The Kid sprang to his feet, but he was too proud to run. He faced Jim with his head up and his fists shut in his pockets.

"Clear, you kids," he said. And then he looked at Jim.

"We may be both in the s-same game," he said. "But we're n-not mates. I never pretended to be

b-better than I am. You told me to haul off Jack West because he wasn't straight. You told me Nick would give me a hell of a time. I tell you they're honest men to you. I don't suppose they're in this any d-deeper than you, and they're not takin' the pious t-tack over it. Pious ! By God ! I thought you were a good man. I knew I was going downhill with the other chaps, but I thought you w-were the real thing. You ! D'you remember how you talked to me that night you caught me in the passage ? I c-could kill you for that ! I'll never believe in religion again. I'll n-never believe in a man again. I don't care where the devil I g-go to now. I don't care what happens. You've about knocked all b-belief out of me, you lying, cheating cur."

He turned on his heel and went up the road swiftly. Jim rubbed his hand over his forehead. It was wet. Then he took out his notebook and jotted down three lines.

The first fruits of Saltire's work had come to him.

CHAPTER X

DEAD SEA APPLES

“Not even when I ask you ? ” said Roseen.

Jim gave the last stir to Miladi’s bran-mash, and straightened, lifting the bucket.

“I can’t tell you business, dear,” he said. “Anythin’ else, my little girl. But my private work belongs to more than me. It ain’t mine to tell you, Roseen.”

Roseen sat on the kitchen-table, swinging her feet. The buckles on her shoes caught the firelight, and the spark in her eyes matched the buckles an instant. Then her mouth drooped.

“I didn’t think you’d begin by having secrets from me,” she murmured.

Jim brushed back his wet hair with a bared forearm, and stared at her with trouble and anxiety in the look. A long, stiff day’s work in the hills lay behind him ; but body-ache and hunger stood aside until Miladi had received all she wanted.

“They’re not my secrets, little girl,” he said.

“They are if you know them. And if you keep things from me already . . . oh, Jim . . . I think it will—will break my heart.”

Jim set down the steaming bucket, came over, and knelt one knee on a stool beside her.

“Roseen,” he said, and pulled her to him with an arm close round her shoulders. “You got to see this

differently, my darlin'. I'd trust you wi' anythin' o' mine. But I can't do more. Look at me an' tell me that you won't ask me again to do more than that, my own little girl."

The strong voice was tender and full of love. But the steadiness in it angered Roseen. In these four days since Jim had taken public shame upon him ; since men had looked aside when he came near, and he had done his work doggedly and in silence, Roseen had slung him into hell, and jerked him back into heaven, and cast him headlong on the earth, until brain and spirit were giddy and his heart was sore with keen love and keener pain. He had winced at the sharpness of the claws more than once, and he had forgotten in the touch of her lips. But now, in his weariness, Roseen unsheathed her claws again.

"Then I've got to believe you don't love me," she said. "No, I don't want your kisses. They don't mean anything. You don't love me, Jim, and you know I love you better than my life . . . better than my soul."

Sincerity is one of those virtues which we value so highly that we are afraid to cheapen it by common use. Jim had not yet learned how jealously Roseen hid hers.

"You don't mean that, darlin'," he said. "A man's work is somethin' separate from himself at times, you see. I have no right——"

"Let me go. I don't want any of your arguments."

"Roseen——"

"Did you hear me, Jim ?"

Jim crushed her close, speaking low and quickly :

"I can't. You know that I can't. Good Lord

what d'you want to do wi' me, my girl ? You've broken me pretty much already, I think."

Roseen turned her face up to his.

"Kiss me," she whispered. And Jim forgot Miladi's bran-mash cooling in the bucket.

Then Roseen spoke, coaxing with warm lips against Jim's ear.

"And you will take me with you to-morrow, dearest ? Just to show that you truly love me ?"

"It's private business——"

Roseen's little soft hands came round Jim's neck, cooling the sunburnt places. The Kid might possibly have remembered the story of Delilah and Samson. Jim's Scripture grounding had been less thorough.

"I won't get in your way. But it's Sunday, Jim. Our first Sunday since I knew you loved me. Jim . . . oh, can't you do this much for me ? I—I have given up something for you, you know. For I can't help hearing when folk are saying that you . . . that you are not acting straight."

"I told you that very day I wouldn't hold you to your word, Roseen."

"What do words matter when you have got my heart ? Oh . . . Jim. . . ."

Then Jim fell, as stronger men have fallen before him.

"I got to go down to Buntree, darlin'. I could take you an' leave you wi' mother an' Betty. But you won't tell any one up here where we're goin', little girl ?"

"Never. Oh, never. But what business can you do on a Sunday, Jim ? Will Mr. Saltire be there ?"

It was fear for another man that winged the arrow. But Jim had no means of guessing it.

"What made you—— ?"

"Then he will, and it's something to do with the gold-stealers. Jim, are you on the track of any of them?"

"You forgit that fellows say I'm one of them, my girl."

Roseen laughed with pursed mouth and shaken head.

"I know better. I know you're after them. I know that's why you're going down to Buntree to-morrow. Didn't I guess right, Jim? Didn't I?"

Jim stood up, putting her away from him. His laugh was nervous and forced.

"You're tryin' to be too clever, little girl. Now, I must go. That mash is gittin' cold. You won't be gone to bed 'fore I'm back, darlin'?"

"I don't know . . . well, you can kiss me on the chance of it. Just one kiss, Jim . . . I said only one."

When the back-door slammed Roseen swung her feet again, watching the light glint on the buckles. Her forehead was ridged and her eyes hard with concentration.

"If I could get him a letter," she said. "I can take one down on the chance, and risk getting some one to give it. Oh, bother; why didn't Jim come home earlier. What's the matter now, mother?"

"Wasn't that Jim I heard a-talkin' jes' now, love? Did he get his supper, poor busy lamb? I told Bignonia to keep it hot in the oven for him. Did he get it, Rosie, pet?"

"I don't know. No, he didn't. He's been fussing over that horse of his." Roseen stood up, stretching her arms and yawning. "I'm going to bed," she said. "You can give it to him. Tell him I was too tired to wait."

Mrs. Mitchell pulled her gaudy wrapper closer round the angles of her figure, and rubbed her nose.

"Blest if I can understand you, duckie," she said. "You do seem to have a aptitude for all the mossy old bad lots in the neighbour'ood. First Soutar—an' I'm glad it ain't me as is goin' to be responsible for the way he was made, an' I hopes he's only a sample, anyhow. Then Jim Kyneton. I reckoned as he was one o' them hero-saints I used to read about as went forth to slay, an' was tender to a buzz-fly. But if he ain't one o' them he's Luficer or . . . or some one else. But he must have his supper, Rosie, if he was the sourest crab that ever walked sideways."

"They both paid for all that they had here, and that's the only part that's your business. I'm going riding with Jim to-morrow, mother. I'll be away all day."

"Sweetest *angel*! What for?"

"Because I want to. Allan Ross will be over, and you can have him all to yourself. Good-night."

Mrs. Mitchell clattered plates and dishes, laying out Jim's supper on the table-end.

"Didn't take no lunch, poor starvin' young sinner as he is. I'll put out some o' that seed-cake. There's that tender 'eart o' mine agin! I don't b'lieve I'd deny the Devil hisself a bite o' somethin' tasty if he come askin' for it pretty. An' Jim . . . well, I do acknowledge I loves a young man wi' a smack o' the sinner in him. A saint's too much like a ham-sandwich without any mustard. Now, if Jim don't come in soon. . . ."

Out in the loose-box Jim stood with his head on Miladi's crest as she blew contentedly over her mash, and the sweet smell of her breath and the even rise and

fall of her ribs against him brought him comfort and ease.

"You're always the same, old girl," he said. "Always the same to me, if you do play old Harry when another man gits round your heels. But a girl ain't so easy to understand as a horse. I oughtn't to be takin' her along to-morrow, in case Saltire meets me half-way. But . . . what could I do? When she looks at me that way . . . 'sweetest eyes were ever seen.' Yes, that's her eyes, my little darlin's eyes. Finished, old girl? Take your nose out o' that, then." He cuffed her lightly on the cheek, looking into her clear, full eye. "Your own come a good second, Miladi," he said. "An' they'd be sadder eyes if you knew what I was takin' you out for to-morrow." He laid his forehead to the rise of the mane suddenly. "Nick an' the Kid," he said in his throat. "Nick an' the Kid. O Lord! if it could be another fellow to take them an' not me. If Saltire will have Hartmann along. But . . . old Nick. What'll mother say to me? What'll she say about that . . . an' about all the other things too?"

This mood held with him down the track through the autumn morning of clear skies and sunshine with Roseen beside him. But when they drew rein at the old stone house and Katherine came out, swift-foot and glad-eyed, Jim forgot that he ever had doubted his mother. She did not see Roseen. She saw Jim only with the marks of strife on his face and the anxiety below the smile of his eyes, and she put both arms straightway round his neck, and kissed his lips.

"My lad," she said. "My own lad."

"Mother. It's all right, mother dear. I knew you'd be hearin' . . . things." Then he stooped his head

lower. "I've brought her, mother," he said. "I've brought Roseen. You've got to love her . . . for my sake."

Some chord in Katherine answered to Jim always. She understood instantly all that the reservation meant. Jim had made his choice, and he knew that it was not the highest choice.

For a moment her eyes were blind and her tongue was dumb. She had given daily sacrifice and nightly prayers for her son, and he was learning the taste of Dead Sea apples before his youth was spent. And she was afraid; for in Jim's strong nature lay danger. A stout stick must snap at the bending where the lither twig will rebound.

Then she smiled in his face.

"I will, my darling," she said. "And for her own sake too."

And then Jim left the women together and rode on to Buntree alone. He had won the girl whom he wanted. He had found out the information desired by Saltire. He had set his foot firmly on the upward stair of his profession. But the skies seemed drab above him, and the air was lifeless, and the bird-calls in the bushland had lost their power to draw him.

The clatter of hoofs sounded behind, a hand smote his shoulder, and Hack pulled alongside, with his round, apple-face beaming good-will.

"Hallo, my daisy martyr. How's the Dik Dik lot gittin' about after the shock you give 'em Thursday? Glory, I never see sech a red-hot set o' loonies. Where did they hatch their brains out o'?"

Among honest men Jim had been a leper these last four days. Among thieves and cheats he had been

feeling his steps carefully and believing himself no better than they. The blood of friendship rushed back to his heart full-tide, and his eyes lit.

"Hack, you don't know I'm not . . ."

"Rats! I know *you*. What yer gittin' at? An' I know Saltire. This is one o' his smelly little games, this is. Hope yer'll git yer money's wuth out o' it, Jim. Look a-here; you send me a invite up ter Dik Dik when yer goes ter pull the cotton-wool off of them fellers' eyes. It ought ter be int'restin' watchin', that."

"You haven't given the show away, old man?"

"See here, Jim, you go ter bed an' sleep that off! What d'yer take me for? If you chooses ter git in the soup I'm seeposin' you does it on purpose. Rattle that mare o' yours up, will yer? I'm goin' down for a shave an' a clean-up 'fore I lands up at your place. Comin' back with me, Jim?"

"Don't know. I expect not. There's Saltire, Hack. So-long. I needn't tell you to keep your mouth shut."

"What d'yer do it for then?" said Hack dryly, and swung away to the right as Saltire came up.

"Jim looks like he's bin off his feed for six months," he told himself. "No wonder, neither, wi' Roseen Mitchell an' Saltire worryin' at him. I'd like ter drown that gel same way they drowns a kitten . . . an' I'd like ter kick Saltire. But Roseen would scratch all right. And Saltire can bounce if he can't be bounced."

But there was no bounce in Saltire when he met Jim.

"Put up your mare, and come to me at Carleton's," he said only. And Jim found him waiting when, ten minutes later, he trod into the little back-room where first he had met the Kid, and shut the door behind him.

Saltire glanced up from his seat by the table. He

was beating his finger-tips on a writing-pad, and his mouth was squared after a manner that Jim knew well.

"Take that chair—in the light," he said. "Jim, you have been finding out enough to hurt you a good deal."

"Yes, sir," said Jim briefly.

Saltire blinked at him out of his little reddened eyes.

"I've got my net flung and my men at all the ropes," he said. "To-day will prove if there are any holes in the net. I should say that we ought to make a haul of about forty if things go well. I've got Sub-Inspector Wilson and two black trackers waiting here in case some one gives us the slip. You tell me you have the names of all the Buntree men, Jim?"

"I believe so, sir."

"And Cleghorn was the only man at Dik Dik after all. Well, he can't get away." Saltire leaned back, crossing one foot over his knee. "Read me your list," he said.

Jim fumbled for his pocket-book. The room seemed suddenly airless and small, and the ceiling a weight on his head. He stood up.

"I—have done my duty, sir. But I ask you to read the list yourself. I—I——"

For a fat man Saltire moved quickly. His hand was on Jim's arm.

"You've been over-doing it," he said. "Like a drink, Jim? Well, go and stick your head out of the window for a mouthful of air. I can't afford to have you fainting or otherwise making a fool of yourself just now. There's rather too much at stake."

From the window Jim heard the rustle of the paper in Saltire's hand, and it was like the rustle of dead leaves

falling when summer's glory is done. Then Saltire spoke heavily.

"I was afraid of this, Jim. But I wish for your sake that it had been another man to bring me their names."

Jim gave no answer. He was watching a honey-eater upside down among the vines of the verandah.

"Young fools," said Saltire, underbreath. "Damned young fools to get themselves into a mess of this sort. Do you think the Kid is dipped deep, Jim?"

"I don't know, sir. I think he has tried to get out of it."

"Yes. Well, we'll find out all that in time, I hope. Jim, I have given you a harder task than I knew. I am sorry."

"It's their own blame, sir. They've got to pay. But I've been thinkin' Nick was straight up to the last."

He bit off the final word sharply to hide the break in his voice. Saltire would have spoken, but a quick step rang on the wooden verandah, and Nick came down it, with his hat on the back of his head and the joviality of drink in his face. Saltire stepped out of sight.

"Call him in," he said curtly.

A moment he saw Jim's head and shoulders sink, and he feared a collapse. Then the big limbs tightened up, and Jim flung the low window wide, thrusting his head out.

"Nick," he called. "Here a minute, will you? I got somethin' to say."

Nick's answer sounded down at the corner.

"Hallo, old man. Comin' in a shake." And at that Jim turned to Saltire, and on his face was that which Saltire had not seen there before.

"You've made a Judas of me, sir," he said.

Saltire looked away and his voice was uneven.

"Brace up, man," he said. "For the Lord's sake brace up. This isn't the time for sentiment. Don't make any mistake, Jim. We mustn't let him slip us up and warn the others."

Nick flung a leg over the low window-sill and followed it into the room. He was noisy and flushed, but his greeting was frank.

"You're lookin' hipped, you old sinner. What's wrong? Is it that little devil, Roseen? Jim, I been hearin' some queer talk 'bout you. N-never b'lieve talk though. I asked the Kid. He was up there, an' he's been goin' round wi' a mouth yer can't open with a wedge. Heard somethin' as sc-screwed him up tight enough. Don't shut that window . . . it's hot as hell in here. Jim. . . ."

Jim had slammed down the window and snapped it. Nick swung round to the door and saw Saltire backed up to it. He glanced from one man to the other, and the flicker of his eyelids told that he understood. Then he drew himself up, looking down on the little fat man with the easy, impudent swagger that once had daunted the Kid.

"What's this for?" he demanded.

"Jim," said Saltire, and Jim's hand dropped on Nick's shoulder.

"I arrest you—" he began; and then Nick turned swiftly, grappling him with a deep-fetched curse of utter rage.

Saltire blundered forward over the chairs. But Jim had dropped to the merciless jiu-jitsu twist that had felled Big Ryan, and the two men went down together and the handcuffs grated and snapped before Saltire

had found his feet. Jim stood back, and Nick came upright with a lithe, swift spring. He looked the finer man of the two at the moment, and Saltire's eyes ran over him approvingly.

"Pity you have taken to crooked ways, Nick," he said. "Your outward appearance is as straight as any I've seen."

Nick laughed. His glance was bold and defiant, but it did not cross Jim's.

"That were pretty neat," he said. "Got anythin' more to say, sir? I'm put out o' gear jes' now."

He clinked the handcuffs derisively, and Saltire's heart swelled.

"By ——! he is a man if he'd only run steady," he muttered. "No. You'll reserve your defence, of course. I have nothing to say to you. Now, Jim."

Jim came forward. His big limbs were trembling, and the sweat stood in beads on his forehead.

"Put your hands up," he said, and went through Nick's pockets with skilful thoroughness, laying the result in a little heap at Saltire's elbow. Nick flushed and winced as Jim's hands first touched him, and Saltire saw Jim bite his lips. Beyond that neither noticed the other. Then Saltire cleared his throat.

"I am not putting you in the Buntree gaol," he said. "It would be too public just now—until we can lay hands on the others. You'll take him back home, Jim. There's a little stone house in your garden, with barred window and heavy door. It must have been a prison sometime. I want him put in there for the present. Is it safe, do you think?"

Nick wheeled, with impudent eyes on Saltire.

"I can give yer my word for that," he said. "Mother

used ter lock us in there when we were kids. I ha' spent hours tryin' ter git out ; but there ain't no way for anythin' bigger'n a rat."

"That will do, then." Saltire looked at Jim. "You will apologise to your mother for me," he said. "But this is no time for sentiment, as I said before. Will you take parole down to your lock-up, Nick ?"

"No," said Nick.

"But you will go quietly, my man. We can't have a row. Jim . . . you'd just best make that sure."

Jim pulled his revolver from his hip and thrust it into the breast of his tunic. Brotherhood and weakness were gone, and he was the hard, alert officer of the law again. His eyes met Nick's for the first time, and there was no mercy in them.

"You will do exactly as you are told," he said. "Exactly, or I'll put a bullet through you. You're not the only man we have to catch to-day. I'll bring the horses round to the window, an' we can git off down the right-o'-way an' across the empty section, an' take the top road home. There's mighty little chance o' any one seein' us on a Sunday mornin', an', if they do, there's no need for you to let on anythin'. I'll git the horses, sir."

"They are at the corner, aren't they ? Go out through the window, Jim."

"I'm sorry, sir ; but I promised Ros—I promised to deliver a note to Mrs. Carleton, an' I couldn't see her when I come in. It won't take me a minute, an' I may find out somethin'."

He was gone three minutes only. Then he drew Saltire aside.

"Send for Mr. Wilson an' Hartmann," he said. "The Kid is sleepin' upstairs . . . he don't come down till about one on Sundays. An' Jack West an' Harrop will be here in half-an-hour for their dinners. We can bag that lot straight. I'll be soon back."

He left the room again with his long, easy step, and Saltire turned to Nick.

"You know your brother better than I do," he said. "But I know him well enough to believe that he means what he says. You'd best be careful if you wish to come through this with a whole skin."

Nick shrugged his shoulders. He had more than his share of courage, but he had no desire to carry cold lead in a place unchosen by himself.

"I don't need you to tell me that," he said.

Then the tramp of hoofs called him out, and Saltire watched him mount, easily, lightly, despite his chafing wrists. He laughed at Saltire as Jim looped up the leading-rein.

"Good huntin'," he said, and rode away with head erect and hat cocked.

Jim's salute had shown his face in the sunlight for a flash of time, and the look on it sent Saltire back to the darker room with a lump in his throat.

"Poor devils," he said. "Poor devils, both. For that young rake-hell is just a good man gone wrong. Well, Jim's paying for the promotion he will get."

Jim would pay more fully when he came to realise that promotion would be his blood-money for this. Just now he rode by Nick through the still blazing heat of midday, and neither man looked at the other, and neither man spoke. At the back-gate Jim stooped to the latch, and felt the leading-rein jerk suddenly taut.

He whipped round, swift as light, and Nick looked into the little deadly eye of the revolver.

"You ought to know me better than that," said Jim only. "Git off there."

He followed Nick down the little path where the autumn leaves made a soft rustle under their tread, took the playroom-key from the nail, and flung the door wide.

"Go in," he said. "I'll take the darbies off for a bit." Then, as Nick rubbed his red chafed wrists, Jim's self-control was shaken for the first time.

"Nick," he said piteously. "Nick. . . ."

But the bite of the iron had closed through Nick's bones to his heart. He turned on his heel, unspeaking. Jim caught at the door upright, and that moment was Nick's had he known to take it. But he stood still, looking at the dusty motes that danced in the yellow sunlight, and at the broken toys lying where they three had left them so few weeks ago. A little gun of his own, with a twisted barrel, lay aslant the pile. Nick grinned. So had the weapons of his later years broken in his hands.

Jim, seeing it also beyond Nick's slim, straight body, went blind for an instant in the hazy sunshine, and the crackle of cicadas along the bushland seemed close and terrible about his ears. Then he rallied. There was so much yet to be done.

"I'll git mother to give you some dinner," he said, and stepped back and locked the door.

But the memory of Nick, defiant, unshaken, in the golden stream of light, went with him up the path and into the kitchen.

At the far table Katherine was peeling apples, and

the vivid gold of the day was on her also. She hummed a little Scotch song, and Betty, moving in and out the pantry, carolled brief echoes, clear as a magpie's morning call.

Jim's tread lifted Katherine's eyes with a smile in them. Then she dropped the knife and sprang up, and the terror in her face brought Betty to the pantry-door.

"Jim," said Katherine. "It's Nick. It is Nick at last."

Her hands had gone to her breast unconsciously. Jim took them, holding them against his own.

"Mother, dear ; he's into this business, but we don't know how far. It may not be very bad. I've got him locked in the playhouse in the garden, mother. Put some dinner in through the window . . . a sandwich or somethin'. Don't give him a knife. And don't tell a soul what's happened. I must go again, dear. I have a lot to do yet."

He loosed her hands. He did not stoop to kiss her or to give her comfort ; but he turned and went up the kitchen again with the silent, strong, puma-like grace in which he had come. Betty stood unmoving. There was something very terrible in the quiet finality of words and manner which turned aside impulsive grief more imperiously than sheet-iron turns rain. Then, as one hears and sees in a dream, Betty saw Roseen slip out from the big cushioned seat by the door and heard her voice call Jim's name. Jim's answer came, hurried and low ; and with sharpened ears Betty heard the kiss and Jim's feet passing swiftly on the flags of the yard. She cut her nails into her palms with sudden fury. Already Roseen had taken that last word and last kiss

which until now had been Katherine's only. Then Roseen came back, with her gliding, cat-soft step. Jim's kiss had brought no more colour to her face, no shy heart-reserve to the wide, clear eyes. She went up to Katherine, laying her hand on the elder woman's hand.

"I am so sorry for you," she said prettily. "May I help you peel the apples?"

Katherine looked down on her, and something of Jim's humour twitched her lips.

"Thank you, dear," she said, and reached up to the shelf for a knife.

Betty walked down to the scullery, shut the door with a snap, and fell to cleaning knives fiercely. Not until dark hid their faces would she and Katherine find each other's arms, there to take comfort without tears, without speech. For Katherine was cast in the strong, silent, Scotch mould; and to Betty, in her young pride and beliefs, this shame that had come upon them was a hot iron to sear all tears from eyes and heart.

Then suddenly she flung the knives from her and dropped on the butter-keg, with her face hid in her apron.

"Oh, Jim," she sobbed. "Oh, Jim. Oh . . . Jim. If she could only give you what you'll be wanting now. If she only could. If she only could."

CHAPTER XI

SALTIRE DRAWS HIS NET

"KID! Kid! Rouse up, you snoring young brute. Kid!"

The Kid came out of dreamland with a grunt and opened one eye.

"Lemme 'lone," he growled. "It's Sunday. . . ."

Jack West gripped him by the shoulders, bringing him out with a twist on the floor.

"You tumble into your togs and make tracks for all you're worth," he said. "The game's up, Kid. We're rounded, and the branding-irons heated. Where are those papers of mine?"

Dazed and blinking the Kid sought for his wits and his clothes.

"I-in the top drawer . . . or the n-next one. Or perhaps they're in m-my box under the b-bed." Then, with a sudden spurt of wrath, "Take your beastly feet off my shirt."

Jack West tossed the top-drawer contents on the bed, upset the bottom drawer, and dived after the Kid's box.

"Look sharp," he cried. "Kyneton may be back any minute. He's nabbed Nick, and Saltire's run off for Hartmann. I saw Jim and Nick pelting along the top road."

"Kyneton?" The Kid looked up from his scattered

wardrobe. "He's in this. I d-didn't tell you before, but——"

"Are these all the papers? Why didn't you tie them up as I told you? He's in it as a trap, yes. I just got warning from Roseen. She made him bring it in a note to Mrs. Carleton. Look here; d'you want to be jugged or not?"

"B-but he is, I tell you. I heard them tax him with it up at Dik Dik, and he c-couldn't give them the lie."

Jack West halted not one moment in the swift folding of the papers and the stuffing of them into his shirt.

"So that was Saltire's game, was it?" he said. "I wonder how much information Jim made by it? Did he get any from you?"

"By Heaven!" cried the Kid, in a sudden flood of understanding. He stood, wild-haired and wild-eyed, with nerveless fingers grasping his coat, and Jack West shook him.

"You can think that out afterwards," he said. "There's no time now. You tumble out the back way and lick across lots to Barnes. Tell him to cut up to Wapshott's Cave with you and lie low till I come. D'you hear?"

"Jim Kyneton's a-a—" stuttered the Kid, and Jack West paused on the door-sill.

"Jim Kyneton's a good man, and this is giving him particular gyp if I know anything of good men," he said.

"Ta-ta. Keep your eyes skinned."

He plunged down the stairs, and the Kid took a long breath, such as a man takes after deep diving.

"I d-don't understand," he said.

Then the sound of quick loud voices below spurred him to action. He leapt down the back-stairs three

steps at a time, and raced out across the sunny section to be hid by the deep bush round Barnes' hut.

It was within five minutes that Hartmann thrust open the Kid's door to find the room empty. He went back and spoke to Jack West where he stood in the bar-parlour with Saltire on guard.

"I dunno," he said. "You know, I s'pose. He's got away some'ow. I dunno."

He was a flaccid man, with as little brain as the Service allowed. He looked from Jack West to Saltire and blinked.

"He's got away some'ow," he said. "I dunno."

Saltire wheeled on Jack West.

"You have warned him and Harrop," he said. "That is clear. How many more? Where did you get the information?"

Jack West looked him between the eyes.

"A gentleman doesn't give a friend away, Mr. Saltire," he answered. "But I don't mind owning that I have warned them. I don't think you will get any one else. I was not quite quick enough myself, unfortunately."

Saltire was cursing underbreath.

"I shall find means to extract that information later," he said. "Hartmann, West is your prisoner. You answer for him until I come back. I may be an hour or I may be six. Don't let him out of your sight."

He went out and sought Jim where Jim and the Sub-inspector beat through the by-ways of Buntree in chase of Harrop and Barnes and a half-dozen more. His little red eyes were angry, and his voice had a cutting edge to it. For there was a flaw in his net, and he did not know where to lay his hand on the man who had made it.

The sun was slanting to the west when Saltire called his men together for his final commands. The black trackers stood loosely in the room-corner with their big toes turned out like the thumbs on a hand, and the dull, dark eyes sleepy. But Jim felt a shiver run over him as he looked on them. For they would track down the Kid as surely as ever bloodhound could do it.

The Sub-inspector beat an impatient foot on the floor. His horse and Hartmann's shook their heads under the rein at the door, and night was coming. Then Saltire cast his orders into few and curt words.

"Wilson," he said, "you take Hartmann and the trackers and young Cherry, whom Hack Ellis has just brought over from Waringa. I want Ellis to go with you; but he objects, and I won't make a point of it. You'll probably find that all the missing men will converge at some given place, and it's your business to find that place. I won't keep you longer. Good luck."

He turned to Jim as the room emptied, and the sternness had not gone from his voice.

"There has been a leakage somewhere," he said. "West owns to receiving a warning. That will have to be inquired into later. Take him down now and put him with Nick. You are answerable for both prisoners until you are relieved. Senior-Constable Hawkins comes in at daybreak. He will take them down to Melbourne. I suppose he will bring several men with him, and it may be needful for you to go on with them after the others. I will see about that in the morning."

He walked to the door, then spun round at a sudden thought and called Jim to him.

"I saw Soutar just now," he said, low. "Do you think he had anything to do with this, Jim?"

"I don't see how he could, sir," said Jim gravely. "And he's no friend of West's. He'd have warned the Kid if he'd meant to warn anybody."

"Possibly it might be revenge on you, Jim."

"That's so, sir. But I don't see how he could know we were strikin' at the lot to-day."

"Ah, well; we must do the best we can now. Be careful of those two, Jim. I hope to find that Buntree is the only district that has made a mess of things."

Great cloud-shadows lay like ink-blots across the track and the tree-tops as Jim took Jack West out under the coming night. The sun set in splashes of blood that stained the sky and were sanded out to gray by unseen hands. Jack West glanced up as a phalanx of black swans passed grandly overhead, with their long necks stretched toward their land of promise. The clanging call of their leader struck to the hearts of the two men who heard, and stirred the lust of the wanderer again. The long metallic note sounded twice more, passed to silence, and the beating of their wings seemed to leave the world empty behind them. Then Jack West spoke.

"You've arranged that neither Nick nor I shall follow them for these four years or more," he said. "What chances do you give the other fellows, Jim?"

"Very poor," said Jim thickly. "There's not a bushman among them. If they're found, they will make a fight for it perhaps. If they're not, it means starvation or snakes. Mind that prickly-pear clump. Down this way . . . who's there?"

It was Roseen in the garden-path, slender and shadowy in her dark, close-fitting habit. She came out from the bushes swiftly, catching Jim by the arm.

"Oh, Jim," she cried. "Oh, Jim . . . don't. Isn't one enough for you? Oh, Jim . . . dearest. . . ."

Jim laid his hand over hers and put her away from him.

"Don't, please," he said, through stiff lips. "I can't wait just now. Come across here, West."

"Jim . . . dearest Jim . . . don't. . . ."

Jack West spoke with light courtesy.

"I say 'Please don't,' too, Miss Mitchell. Nick and I are not worth your tears. Let Jim get me under cover, and then give him the chance to tell you so."

And as Jim pulled the door shut to lock him behind it, he spoke with a mocking pity that only Nick interpreted.

"I believe that it is you who had the right to comfort Miss Mitchell just now," he said. "I hope you will be able to make her satisfied with your day's work, Kyneton. But . . . I would like to remind you that I have not had any dinner. Hartmann ate it, and it seemed to console him for his fall-in over the Kid."

Nick neither spoke nor moved where he stood in the farther corner, and Jim locked the door with an ache at his heart that was acute enough to be physical.

Then Roseen's arms came round his neck and her warm lips met his.

"Jim," she whispered. "I have wanted you so, darling. Oh, I have wanted you so."

He kissed her; but there was none of the passion in him that her touch had wakened at other times, and she felt it in quick resentment.

"How cold you are, Jim," she said. "And how hard. Haven't you any pity for them? Oh, it is a terrible thing to be merciless. Jim . . . can't you let them go?"

Jim smiled, even as Betty had seen Katherine smile that afternoon at Roseen.

"When the Lord made women forgivin', He forgot to make her understand that the Law can't be forgivin', little girl," he said. "It would be more than my life's worth to me to let them go."

Roseen shivered in his arms.

"Don't go back to the house," she said. "Stay here and talk to me. Your mother and Betty are so kind, but I can't understand them. They don't like me to be sorry for them. And I am . . . very, very sorry, Jim."

Something in Jim was calling out blindly for that which she could not give. He did not so interpret it. He knew only that, for the first time, her words and her touch left him cold. He turned toward the house, rubbing his hand over his forehead.

"I'm a bit tired, darling," he told her. "And I must get those poor fellows somethin' to eat. Yes, mother, yes. We're comin' in, Roseen an' me."

Katherine was near him, with the soft, calm sweep of her dress, and the soft, calm tones of her voice.

"I have a hot tea ready for them and for you, Jim," she said. "You can take theirs down at once if you like, and then have your own in peace. Betty has put it on a tray, dear."

The cheerful commonplace speech gave him the strength it was meant to give. He took the tray from Betty with a quick sigh of relief.

"How you always think of everythin', mother," he said. "And I will want to take them some blankets. It's goin' to be precious cold to-night."

But neither cold nor dark of the night could keep him

in after the women had fed him and given him drink. He got up, feeling for his pipe.

"I'll just go out an' have a smoke," he said.

But Betty, creeping from her bed more than once through the moonlit night, saw the dark figure walking up and down the strip of grass before the playhouse, with bent head and hands behind him. And, on looking again at the dawning, through the clear flood of light, Jim was walking the grass-plot still.

That silent, unresting figure grew to her terrible and unaltering as Fate, and, when she glanced out once more at leaving her room, her heart gave thanks that it was gone. Then she opened her door and knew why.

Katherine stood by the new-lit fire holding a frying-pan, and Jim was opposite, with a look on his face such as a man seldom shows to his mother.

"Tell me," he said. "You did it, or you know who did it. They have been gone some hours, for their blankets are cold. Tell me. Do you hear?"

His voice was lower than usual, and there was no passion in it nor in his face. But Betty understood why Katherine swayed a little as she answered him.

"I can't, Jim. I don't know. I didn't know they were gone."

"Mother! Don't lie to me! You are the only one who loves him enough to do this. When was it? I remember droppin' the key on the tray when I brought it back, an' I left it there a while . . . I don't remember how long. O God! Mother, you don't know what you've done for Nick an' me. Mother . . . tell me!"

"Jim, I can't tell you. I don't know. Oh, my son; don't look at me as your father used to look. Jim. . . ."

He caught her suddenly and held her close to him.

"I take it back," he said. "It wasn't you. It couldn't a-been you. I know who it was now. Mother, I must go down an' tell Saltire. They were in my charge. Kiss me, mother. Kiss me, mother darlin' . . . an' let me go."

As the door shut behind him Betty came over and touched Katherine's shoulder.

"It was Roseen," she said in a harsh, strained voice.

"Hush," Katherine turned to her swiftly. "You have no right to say that, Betty. Perhaps . . . the door was open, and some one might have slipped in. . . ."

"It was Roseen," said Betty again. "He says he knows who it was now. It was Roseen."

Then she took the pan gently from Katherine's hand.

"Jim will have to get away early, I expect," she said. "We must have breakfast ready for him when he comes back. Are the chops cut, dear?"

Jim came back whilst they sputtered yet on the fire. Miladi was white with lather, and he groomed and fed her before he took his own food. He did not speak of his meeting with Saltire, but Katherine guessed the issue by his tone and his manner. Suspicion had fallen heavily on him, and Saltire's tongue had not spared him.

In his room he packed a valise swiftly. Then he gave them the first clue as he stooped to buckle his spurs.

"Senior-constable Hawkins rode in wi' four men while I was with Saltire," he said. "I'm goin' out wi' them now. I may be only a day or so, mother, or I may be a month. I can't tell. Good-bye, dear. Good-bye, Betty. Tell Roseen——"

"She is out in the garden," said Betty. "I think she is waiting to say good-bye to you, Jim."

His face lightened, and he went out eagerly. Betty looked at Katherine.

"He loves her still in spite of it," she said. "In spite of it. Don't you see that he has taken the blame on himself?"

Katherine put both hands on the girl's shoulders and looked into her eyes.

"Betty," she said. "We don't know. Remember always that we don't know. Give her the benefit of that, my lassie. Judge not that ye be not judged."

Betty's lips quivered. But her eyes were dry.

"I shall never be as good as you," she said. "I don't want to be if it means forgiving her. Can we send her home at once, auntie?"

"Hardly," said Katherine, and smiled. "Remember that she belongs to Jim, my Betty. We must never forget that."

"No," said Betty dully. Then she caught Katherine close to her.

"Auntie," she gasped. "It wouldn't hurt so much if—if——"

Katherine understood. Jim had fallen to forgive here.

"It is not for us to judge, my bairn," she said patiently. "If she can explain to satisfy Jim it is not for us to judge."

In the garden Roseen was clothed with explanations. But at first sight of Jim's face she tore them off like a veil. Jim did not know! She ran to him, feeling his arms clip tightly round her and his kisses touch her hair.

"You're not angry?" she murmured. "Oh, Jim, you're not angry?"

"Never wi' you, my own dear little girl. Never wi' you. With Betty I am very angry, darlin'. She was

fond o' Nick ; but I didn't think she'd play a dirty trick like this. It'll mean shootin' before we git either o' those two again, my girl. Now . . . I must go, dearie——”

“Betty ! Jim, did you ask Betty——”

“No need for that, my girl. I guessed it. Let me go, darlin'. Take your——”

“Jim . . . don't be hard on Betty. She—she loves Nick, and a woman will do a lot for the man she loves, you know.”

Inspiration had flown past Roseen, to be winged and brought down on the instant. Jim pressed her head back, kissing the soft lips.

“Bless your dear heart, my girl,” he said. “I hadn't thought o' that. But it will make things harder in the end, Roseen. She'd best have left it.”

“Jim . . . oh, Jim . . . no. Let them go. Dearest, dearest, let them go. I can't have you go after them, Jim.”

“My little girl, don't be frightened. I *must* go—now. I'll be back soon, darlin'.”

She clung to him fiercely. Such love as her little soul knew had ripened swiftly at knowledge of Jack West's danger, and Jim was not the tool she had believed him to be.

“Jim. Wait a little. Wait an hour or two. Give them a chance. Oh, Jim, if you love me don't go after them. Jim, you don't love me ! You don't love me——”

“Never say that again, my girl. I love you better than my life. But I can't wait now, Roseen. Loose your dear arms off my neck.”

“You don't love me,” cried Roseen. “Jim, Jim, stay when I ask you. If you get shot——”

Jim's hands were unsteady. But he unclasped hers with them.

"I must go," he said. "It's my duty first. I must go."

He did not know that the terror in her eyes and on her stammering lips was for another man. He stooped and kissed her on the forehead.

"God bring me back to you, my own girl," he said huskily, and wheeled from her.

But she ran after, with hands out and feet stumbling on a fallen branch of late roses. The golden red of the morning sun was over her, and all the scents of the garden came to Jim with her call.

"Jim . . . Jim . . . if you love me come back . . . just for a little while."

With his hand on Miladi's crest Jim halted a moment. Then he flung himself to the leather, ripped in the spurs that Miladi knew by eyesight only, and raced up the steep track to the road with the devil of temptation behind him. Roseen stopped sobbing. She threw out her hands with a little gesture of dismissal.

"Jack will have to look after himself, now," she said, and bent to pick a nosegay of flowers for Katherine.

CHAPTER XII

FOR JIM'S SAKE

"MISS BETTY," called Saltire. "Can you spare me a few minutes, if you please?"

He stood on the curb before the little weather-board post-office with the morning light strong in his red pig-like eyes, and Betty pulled Myall across the road to him.

"Yes, Mr. Saltire," she said indifferently. "As many as you want."

The gladness of vigour had gone from her, and she looked at him with grave eyes that had lost their dash and vigour of the sea. Saltire cleared his throat. He was more tactful than to offer sympathy just now.

"I want to speak to you about your brother Jim," he said. "He took the blame of last night's escape on himself—said he must have forgotten to lock the door or some such nonsense. I did not believe him, or he would not be leading Hawkins and his men just now. But I want to know who was responsible, Miss Betty."

Betty looked away. Her lips were set and her young face was strained into lines. Saltire watched it through the corners of his eyes.

"It struck me that he was shielding some one," he continued softly. "A woman, for choice. Men will do very foolish things for the sake of a woman."

There was a yellow dog rolling in the dust outside the butcher's door. Betty watched him with interest. Would he roll right over? When a horse rolled right over people said it was going to rain. . . . Saltire was speaking again. . . .

"As a usual thing a man considers himself bound to shield a woman," said Saltire slowly. "Another woman may possibly not consider herself bound in like degree."

Betty felt her limbs turning cold. Jim loved Roseen. Jim loved Roseen . . . and that yellow dog was rolling. . . .

Saltire's hand shut suddenly on her wrist, and his eyes, keen and sharp as a lance, seemed to plunge into her mind and read the truth.

"You know who it was," he said. "You know, and Jim knows. Tell me, then. Tell me at once."

"I don't know," gasped Betty. "I don't know. I—I——"

"Was it Roseen Mitchell?"

Betty's eyes dropped. But they were a fraction of a second too late for Saltire.

"I don't know," she said sullenly.

Saltire laughed. Then he tapped her knee with his finger-tips.

"Come, come, Miss Betty; it's no use trying that now. It was Roseen Mitchell, of course. She warned West through an enclosure in a letter which Jim gave Mrs. Carleton. She got the key from Jim somehow, and let West go. This is purely deduction; but it's truth, nevertheless. The trouble will be to prove it truth. Do you think that Jim will stick to the story he told me?"

"Yes," said Betty.

"So do I. Now, Miss Betty, give the boy a chance. He has a fairly poor one just now. He considers Roseen Mitchell. She is a woman and the woman he loves, which makes the matter the very deuce. But you have no right to consider that girl at the expense of Jim Kyneton."

The butcher came out and kicked the yellow dog. It went down the empty street on three legs, yelping. Betty looked straight at Saltire.

"I believe that Roseen did it," she said. "But I did not see her do it. I did not see her touch the key. Jim left it on the tray and forgot it. I think it was there about two hours, and we were going in and out . . . washing up and making the place tidy. She could have done it. But I cannot say that she did."

Saltire stuck out his lower lip.

"Awkward," he said. "Awkward, that. Miss Betty, had you any reason to think that she cared for West?"

"No," said Betty.

"Do you think—pardon me—do you think she loved Jim?"

Betty looked at him. And unconsciously the brave piteous eyes told Saltire her secret.

"I don't know," she said.

"No, no; of course not." Saltire glanced away. "Well, Jim was careless, and I'm afraid he is going to pay dearly for his carelessness. Do you think the girl will confess?"

"I don't know," said Betty again.

Saltire laughed, half in irritation.

"You'd make a first-class witness . . . what is it?"

"Jim wasn't careless," said Betty swiftly. "He had not had anything to eat all day . . . and it was very hot . . . and . . . and he nearly fainted when he came in. He told me to get a candle and give him the key, for he had dropped it on the tray, and I . . . I forgot. I think he thought he had it. He was very vexed when he found it there afterwards."

Saltire contrasted this with Jim's bald statement and swallowed a grin.

"You're all right, Jim of the Ranges," he said in his heart. Then he stepped back.

"Thank you," he said. "You have done a good deal for Jim, Miss Betty. I won't keep you. Good-morning."

He looked after her, noting the easy sway of the strong young figure as she put Myall to a canter.

"A fine girl, that," he said. "A fine girl. And the other is the damnedest little jade that ever fooled an honest man. Well, she has mixed the baggage pretty effectively this time. I wonder if I could bounce anything out of her if I went down and took her on the hop."

An office-boy came to the door with a handful of telegrams. He was fresh from the city, and already Saltire knew him for an unlicked cub to whom some one would presently apply intelligence with a stock-whip.

He glanced at Saltire's baggy gray tweeds with the patch of oil on the knee, yawned, and stepped forward with the sun on the shine of his hair-parting.

"These have just come for you," he said, and yawned again.

Saltire took them, ripping the envelopes swiftly, and glancing through the messages. They came from the

half-dozen centres where Saltire's men had yesterday pulled in the net Saltire had spread. Every strand of that net had held true—except Buntree.

"Except Buntree," said Saltire, underbreath. "And every man is all right—except Jim of the Ranges. And he is the only one of the lot whom I'd have sworn would never have failed me."

The office-boy glanced down the street, where a drover and a couple of dogs lounged outside the smithy.

"Deadly dull hole," he said. And then Saltire wheeled on him, shaking a yellow paper.

"What the devil—" he choked. "What the devil . . . when did this come through?"

"You'll find the time on it," drawled the boy, unmoving.

Saltire's blood heated. But he looked at the paper again. It was a long telegram from the Police Headquarters in Russel Street, and it amazed him more than many things had amazed him throughout his varied life.

"On receipt of your wire," it told him, "we wired Hawkins at all the Buntree District-offices to instantly place Kyneton under close arrest until further orders."

"Of all the blazing imbecilities," said Saltire. "With Jim acting as tracker, too." Then he gasped. "Good Lord! That little hussy is at the bottom of this! She's got a head on her shoulders . . . and I should very much like to knock it off. Here . . . you, where's that wire you sent down this morning in my name? I want to see it."

The boy brought his gaze back to Saltire with dignity.

"You can't have it," he said. "Your request is out of order."

"Out of—by George! if you try that with me! Hand me that wire . . . on the jump. It is forged, and you'll be imprisoned for compounding a felony if I don't see it inside of half-a-minute. D'you hear?"

"B-but I think——"

"I don't want you to think. You do it. Sharp!"

It was effective as the stockwhip. But Saltire was as swift, and his head was thrust through the window as the boy brought down the file.

"Haven't you got the original?" he demanded.

"No. No, s-sir. He gave it to me to take down."

"He," said Saltire. "*He*. But—well, never mind. Let's see it."

The construction hurt Saltire for years afterwards.

"Two prisoners in charge of Constable Kyneton escaped. After Kyneton left with Senior-constable Hawkins and party to scour the district after them I discovered that Kyneton had freed prisoners. What shall I do?"

" 'What shall I do!' " groaned Saltire. " 'What shall I *do*.' Great celestial heavens above! do they think me mad or raging drunk down there! 'What shall I do.' Oh, my prophetic soul!"

He leaned forward, tapping the paper with his forefinger.

"Who brought this, and when?" he demanded. "Be careful. There's enough here to hang somebody, and to put you in gaol."

It was well known that Saltire was relentless in his methods of extracting what he wanted. The boy blinked and gulped like a half-drowned puppy.

"A t-tall man," he said. "He stooped . . . and he hadn't shaved. His moustaches was uneven . . . he had dirty nails. . . ."

"Soutar," murmured Saltire. "And what the deuce do you mean by putting one man's name to a wire when another man gave it verbally?"

"I—I thought it was his name. I——"

"Did he tell you so?"

"I—I suppose so. I didn't think——"

"You'll have time to think in gaol. And I'd advise you to do it. That's all just now."

Then Saltire went back to the curb, sucking hard at his new-lit pipe.

"I must get the rights of this sharp," he said. "Or we lose Jim and we lose the men. Now . . . let's see. The mischief is that on the face of it that wire is right, and Jim will confirm it if he has the chance. Well, he mustn't have the chance. I can't over-set Russel Street special orders on my own—and what can I wire them? That the thing is a forgery, of course, and that I don't want Jim stopped. Then I go down and explain that the men were in Jim's charge and got away from him, and that he confessed that he was to blame. That will look mighty well for me. And there's the matter of the letter he gave Mrs. Carleton. I would like to know how much he told that girl, or if she picked his pockets for his correspondence. That's more likely. Now. . . ."

He trod the rough sidewalk slowly, with hands behind him and eyes half-shut. A mob of sheep crawled down the dusty centre, with foot-sore dogs panting beside and a knot of drovers in the rear. Saltire turned up a grassy side-street and halted to chew on his thoughts.

"If Jim is put out of action just now we lose those two men to a certainty. They are splendid bushmen ; and once they get over the Murray and out West, or up into Queensland, we won't find them this year or next. Hawkins is as much use as a canary in following a trail, and his men are town-bred. So Jim . . . by George ! if I could get hold of old Hawkins for a couple of minutes, I could make him see daylight. To get those fellows is Jim's only chance to clear himself, and he's too good a man to be turned down. To keep Jim is our only chance to get the men. If I interfere with Russel Street, holding the data I do, I'll probably find myself in the soup. Then . . . supposing I could lay my hand on a bushman who could follow the trail of six men at a decent pace, and supposing I sent a message to Hawkins that the first wire he got would deprive him of the best white-man tracker in the country and spoil the hunt, I'll guarantee he'll avoid townships as if they were the plague. And Hawkins won't split. By the Lord Harry ! I'll try it if I can get hold of a man. A word is enough for Hawkins. He'll manage the rest himself. If Hack Ellis . . . there's Miss Betty again. I wonder if she knows where he is."

To Saltire's question Betty shook her head. Myall was reefing the bit, and something of the energy and life of the horse had entered into her.

"He's gone home," she said. "He went last night. What is it ? Anything I can do ?"

"This was sent by Soutar, probably at Roseen Mitchell's instigation," said Saltire, and handed the paper over. "And this is the Russel Street reply."

Betty read them through. Then she looked up at

Saltire, and the sparkle was back in her eyes and the ringing strength in her voice.

"You are going to stop this?" she cried. "How? What will you do? You'll tell them in town——"

"I can't. Suppose Jim has already been caught and confessed to it? He will have to stand the music himself then, Miss Betty. I can't help him."

"But you will help him," said Betty. "You mean to. How?"

Her voice was steady and controlled. Saltire looked at her in approval.

"I want a bushman to send to Hawkins," he said. "I can give Hawkins a sufficient hint in a very few words. That will allow Jim the chance to clear himself. He loses it for ever if he is stopped now."

He had the wit to use Jim only as the lever. But the desire of the trapper was strong in his own heart. Betty drew her dark brows together.

"I don't know any good bushmen . . . oh, there's Sinner—Jim's dog, you know. He'd follow if we showed him anything of Jim's. But . . . he would not go with a stranger." She leaned forward, her eyes meeting Saltire's.

"Mr. Saltire," she said, "I'll take that letter. How soon can you have it ready?"

The decision and virile strength of her daunted Saltire. He stared, stammering and utterly amazed.

"My dear Miss Betty . . . 'pon my soul, if a woman could do it I believe you could. But——"

"I can be ready in about half-an-hour," said Betty, slewing Myall round. "They took the bush just above the old mill, didn't they? If you meet me there with the letter, I'll try not to be more than half-an-hour."

May I have those two wires to explain to auntie? You can get them back from her afterwards. Hawkins has nearly five hours start, hasn't he? Myall can make that up."

Dust from Myall's hoofs gave good-bye. Saltire looked after her with red screwed-up eyes, and his teeth clicked on his pipe-stem.

"Good business," he said. "Good business. She'll put it through better than a man for sake of the man she loves. Jim of the Ranges, you're the biggest fool ever the sun shone on, and if I were thirty years younger, it'd go hard with me but I'd cut you out with Miss Betty. Well, if I get out of this with a whole skin I'll be lucky . . . but if I get Jim out of it I'll be damned amazed."

Katherine was at her weekly baking when Betty came up the kitchen with a glow in eyes and face that seemed to radiate light.

"Come into my room—quickly," she said. "Now . . . read those. Don't be frightened. It's all right, dear."

"Betty," said Katherine, and dropped on the bed, holding the papers in her nerveless hands.

"It's all right," said Betty. "Soutar sent that wire, and Mr. Saltire is sending Hawkins a message that will put Jim straight. I am taking it. Don't say a word, auntie. It's no use. I'm going."

She spoke in a quick level tone. Her movements were rapid as she flung off her clothes and shook her hair down.

"Bring me that suit of Jim's hanging behind his door," she said. "Be quick, auntie darling. I've only got till ten to eleven before I meet Mr. Saltire."

"Betty——"

"Don't, dear. I can't go as a girl. I don't know where I may get to or who I might meet. And I can't risk being stopped."

Katherine crossed the kitchen dazedly. Then, feeling Jim's clothes in her arms, her mother-heart went out to her boy.

"God forgive me," she said. "I must let the child go. For Jim is dearer to me . . . O God! . . . he is dearer than my life."

But, when she thrust the door open, sudden tears scorched her eyes and a lump came to her throat. Betty's bright hair lay in rough masses on the floor, and Betty, half-clad and with set lips, hacked at the uneven lengths on her head with quick, desperate strokes.

"Betty . . . my lassie, my lassie!" cried Katherine, and Betty looked at her from under the rough tousled thatch.

"I don't care," she said half-fiercely. "You know that I would kill myself for Jim if he needed it. I'm not ashamed to tell you, and I'm not ashamed of loving him. Give me his clothes."

She laughed when she stood up in them, with an old slouch hat of Jim's over her eyes and a pair of Nick's worn boots on her feet.

"I'd pass, wouldn't I?" she cried gaily. "I'd pass . . . but I hope Sinner will know me. Dear, I'll have the tucker in my swag, not in the picnic-basket. And my rifle . . . thanks. It's loaded, but I'll take some more cartridges in case Sinner gets hungry. Yes, I gave Myall his feed."

All Katherine's power of concentration helped her, and it wanted a quarter to the hour when Betty led

Myall out with an old saddle of Nick's girthed round him.

"Roseen is still down in the township," she said. "I don't think she'll be back to lunch. She went to see Polly Deans. You'll have to make up some story about my going away, dear. And don't keep her if you don't want to."

Then she took Katherine in her arms with a sudden swift grip that hurt them both.

"Auntie, auntie," she cried, "it's for Jim. Remember, darling, it's for Jim, and I'm going to do it. Dearest, I *will* do it. I don't quite understand; but Mr. Saltire says it's the only thing to save him. Auntie, you mustn't fret. Promise me, auntie."

"No. No, Betty darling . . . we will both be brave. Good-bye, my lassie."

At the gate Betty turned, waving her hat. The mid-day sun shone full on the strong young grace of her figure, and the laugh in the bright face below the shock of rough hair. And Katherine sent a gay laugh and a jest to speed her before she went back to the lonely house.

Saltire met Betty with a cool self-possession that steadied her nerves and lessened the scarlet blood in her cheeks.

"You'll do it without any trouble," he said. "Sinner looks fit, too. You keep him in good condition, Miss Betty. Most young ladies let their dogs get too beastly fat. Yes, here's the letter. You have just got to deliver it to Hawkins."

Then he held her hand a moment.

"My dear," he said. "If I had a daughter I would not wish her to be other than like you. Good-luck go with you, Miss Betty. And I believe that it will."

He watched Myall take the upward track with great heaving shoulders, and he heard Sinner's one yelp of delight as he nosed Jim's trail.

"I hope the ultimate effect on Nick won't strike her," he said. Then he chuckled. "Love, love," he said. "It makes the world go round; but it breaks more cogs in the wheels than any other mortal thing."

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN THE HUNT WAS UP

IN the heart of the bush the camp-fire shone blood-red as the sun in a sky of smoke. 'The smell of roast meat was about it, and the smell of billy-tea and of horse-flesh, and of the rank tobacco smoked by Hawkins' men. But above all, through all, the warm, strong, harsh smell of the burning gum-sticks filled the quiet night, stealing home to the senses of each Australian as surely as the voice of a lover. For the smell of hot dried gum-sticks on a summer's day or a winter night is the essence of Australia and the spirit-call which her sons never forget, let Life draw them where it will.

Jim lay on his elbows, sucking his pipe, and watching the group about the fire. In the red glow Hawkins' strong face opposite showed dark and gnarled as an ironbark. Behind his shoulder Cleet, of the Detective Force, handled a worn pack of cards, playing Patience up one leg and down the other. Two more yarned in low tones with a cloud of smoke over them, and little Parbury slept noisily, with a full feed to console him for the promise of a night-ride when the moon rose.

Somewhere a prowling dingo, scenting the smell of meat, howled once, and the horses stirred in their hobbles for fear. Miladi whinnied, then whinnied again, in answer to Jim's low whistle, and silence settled

over the night again. Jim half-shut his eyes, drinking in all that it told him with a long sigh of content. For not all that might be and that was could crush him when the bush had him fast in her arms. The primary instincts were strong in him, as they are in all men who know the kindly earth—not as so much soil to tread on, but as a living creature doing her work in patience; and understanding, holding and rounding out the passionate life of bird and animal and insect where they fought and loved and drew in joy from the sun and died with the glamour of earth yet on them. For, most surely, man who came from the earth and who will go to it again, has chords within him which will fit him all his days to interpret her if he but listens when her voices sound on them.

But the higher instincts were strong in Jim also, quickened by the clean air combing through the bush; by the throbbing breast and brave eyes of the little mother-bird guarding her eggs; by the careless reflection of the red-seeded fairy-fog in a rock-pool; by the flutter of a painted butterfly or the straight swift course of a wild bee; by the roar of mountain torrents and the crash of wild storms; and by all the hot, vivid, reckless life that had called him and called him again since first his child-ears had listened for the talk of the wind through the keyhole.

He sat up suddenly, setting his mind forward to quick clock-work precision again.

“There’s a horseman comin’,” he said. “Only one. Will you have the fire put out, Hawkins?”

“No. We may want light. But what do you think, Jim? If it is only one——”

“It’s a drover got bushed most like. But it’s as

well to be ready. He's headin' straight on for us. . . . Good Lord ! ”

Sinner leapt on him, rolling him over, and licking him with the hot tongue of exhaustion and delight.

“ Is it Nick ? ” said his heart in swift fear. “ Is it Nick ? For Sinner won't go wi' any but the three of us.”

Then he sat up as the crash of an animal came nearer. At the edge of the circle of light the black bulk of a horse showed faintly ; the horseman flung himself off and crossed the clearing to Hawkins. He was a tall, straight-limbed youngster, and he carried his head up and moved with the free, lithe step that Jim knew well.

Jim pushed Sinner's head aside with both hands and stared blankly. There was no defined sensation in him.

“ Betty,” he said, underbreath. “ My soul ! Betty ! ”

Then he drew his feet in, stood up, and stepped back softly into the shadow. He knew vaguely that his face told more than he could hide at that instant.

Betty skirted the fire and put the letter into Hawkins' hands.

“ Mr. Saltire sent it,” she said, with the slow Australian twang that Katherine had rooted out diligently from her daily speech. “ He arst me could I catch yer up, an' I said as I guessed I co-ould. And I hev.”

Jim bit his lip on a smile. Betty ! He had said always that there was something of the boy and of the devil in her. Hawkins read the letter. Then he folded it with an oath that brought a light to Jim's eyes. Betty's ears were not used to this.

“ D'you know anything about what's written here ? ” demanded Hawkins.

“No-a,” said Betty. “I say, kin I have some tucker an’ a booze? I been ridin’ hard.”

“Yes. Yes; certainly. Men . . . Jim Kyneton . . . will you . . .”

Hawkins glanced round, but Betty spoke quickly.

“I’ll jes’ strip my horse an’ give him a rub-down first. When are yer goin’ on again?”

“About three hours,” said Hawkins, and forgot the messenger in the reading once more of the message.

The man nearest the fire rose on his elbow and slung the billy.

“Here’s somethin’ waitin’ yer when yer wantin’ it, mate,” he said, and dropped into low-toned talk again.

“Thanks,” said Betty, and walked back across the clearing to Myall.

A sudden and awful thought had possessed her. With the side-sense which is beyond actual sight she knew that Jim had seen her. She knew that he was somewhere there in the dark, watching her and thinking—what?

She reached Myall’s heated familiar bulk beyond the light-circle and clung to him, cold to the heart. Since the midday of yesterday she had ridden with scarcely a break, and the strain and the loneliness had been cruel to her. She had won the goal, she had kept faith with Saltire, and Jim . . . he had stood apart from her, and his heart would say, “Roseen would never do such a thing as this.”

Then she heard his voice, round and drawling as she knew it always.

“All right. I’ll see to the kid. Shove that damper back in the ash, Bert, will you?”

And then she heard his step, and fear of himself caught her. She braced her heart for his contempt, for his anger, for his pitilessly direct questions to which, by Saltire's command, she could give no answer. Agonising shame rushed over her, and she pressed her face into Myall's neck, hearing Jim halt at her shoulder. Then Jim spoke.

"Betty, you little sinner," he said. "Couldn't you a-done wi' less than my best togs?"

The pathetic emphasis, the paltry question in a tense crisis, over-set Betty. She gasped, fighting hysteria of laughter and tears wildly. Jim laid his hand on the rein.

"Back your horse in here, kid," he said loudly. "I think there's a spare halter——"

Then in the dark Betty felt herself lifted gently away and set down on a log.

"You can cry for five minutes," said Jim in her ear. "Not longer, or you'll show it. Drink this."

Her teeth clattered on the metal cup, and the stuff burnt. But it brought sense back to her, and out of a cloud of whirling, hazy shadows she heard Hawkins call.

"Kyneton," he said. "Do you know anything of that boy?"

Jim went forward into the light, and Betty's heart said a deep "Thank God." She had saved him as Saltire told her to. And he had complained because she took his best clothes to do it in. Here tragedy and comedy knocked heads together again, and she shook with hysterical giggles at Jim's answer.

"A little. I'll probably know more directly, for he's dog-tired an' I've given him a nip. But I wouldn't ask

him questions just yet if I were you. I won't be god-father to his answers till he's had time to work it off."

Hawkins' laugh rolled out in a deep rumble, and Cleet's little cackle echoed it. Jim crossed over to Myall, unsaddled him, unstrapped the hobbles, and fixed them with the unerring correctness that guides a man well used to horses in the dark. Then Betty felt his hand on her shoulder as she lay forward on the log.

"Feeling better, old girl?" he asked softly.

Betty shivered. She was utterly weary, and all was strange and unreal.

"Jim," she whispered. "Don't ask me why I came. Don't ever. Mr. Saltire said you weren't to know. Oh . . . Jim, I was so frightened. . . ."

"Oh, git out, Betty. I've never known you frightened of anythin'. You are dog-tired, that's all, an' I'm goin' to put you into my blankets for a bit after you've had some tucker."

He brought blankets and bread and bloater-paste. He fed her and rolled her up, soothing her as he might have soothed an over-wrought baby. And Betty obeyed him simply as a baby, trusting the chivalry which put aside all that was unusual in this, and dropping asleep on his arm with a little sigh of content.

Then Jim went back to the fire, turning the stray questions with light words and a heavy spirit. After his own fashion he pieced this puzzle together. Betty had set Nick free the once. She had come now, by Saltire's will or without it, to set him free again if chance should arise. And here Jim must baulk her as he was baulking his own heart. For the trail of the two men

lay clear before him, and he knew well that neither Hawkins nor himself would be whipped off until the end.

He stirred the dying ashes with the toe of his boot, and some half-forgotten words slipped into his mind :

“ We ourselves will smile at our own selves hereafter.”

A grin caught his lips, turning them up.

“ That’s it,” he said. “ That’s sense. Wait till it all pans out. But, by George ! I reckon the last lesson a man learns on this earth is how to laugh at himself with himself.”

Later, he went back and roused her. She sat up, blinking drowsy-eyed at the drowsy moon rising, flushed also with sleep, behind the long ranks of the tree-boles.

“ I don’t want to get up,” she said, half-cross and half-laughing. But Jim was staring at the cropped, rough, bare head, where he had last seen the shining coils of bright hair. In some strange way this outward sacrifice touched his man-understanding beyond all things, and his voice was unsteady as he spoke.

“ Betty, Betty, dear. Did you care that much ? ”

Betty’s inner knowledge brought the blood in a rush to her forehead and scored shame and anger black in her eyes. She sprang up, and the sudden vitality and defiance of the whole of her stirred response in Jim, so that he shaped his words as though to a man.

“ It’s plucky of you, Bet ; but it’s no earthly use, old chap. You let him go before, an’ I’m not goin’ to give you a look-in this time. I can’t. I—oh, curse it all, you know, it was a bit low-down for you to play that on me, Betty—though I’ve always heard that a girl doesn’t think much of honour when it’s standin’ between her an’ the man she loves.”

Betty was quick to perceive at all times. Thought ran through her brain with the clatter and the follow-on of kinematograph pictures.

Roseen had not told. Therefore Jim had not sinned in forgiving her. Jim had fitted the yoke to his neck for sake of Betty—of Betty, and not of the woman he loved. This would comfort her in lonely hours presently. Jim believed that she had done this and all beside for love of—was it Nick or Jack West? A little bubbling laugh leapt up and out, and she nodded her head with her cropped curls glowing redder in the fireshine.

“You always do hit the nail, Jim,” she said. “Even if it happens to be the thumb-nail. But I don’t mean to ask you to give me a look-in, you see.”

“I’ll send you back when we git to the first township of any sort, Betty.”

“You’ll attend to your own business, I think, Jim.”

She thrust her hands in her coat-pockets and looked at him with her head up. Jim grew angry. Besides, the coat was his.

“Why have you followed him here?” he demanded. And then, to all that the silent, curved mouth and the impudent eyes told him, he gave indignant reply.

“You’ve done a thing that no nice girl ought to do. Nick has got himself into this mess, and he’s got to pay for it. You’ve come to lend him a hand again, and I tell you you shall not. It’s a business for men, this, and you’ve no right to have your name in it.”

Betty let the smile glint on her lips for an instant. It was Nick, then. But Jim said that no nice girl would do this. He also would give payment before all was done.

“It’s generally only in circuses that the clown both

asks the questions and answers them," she said. "You are striking out a new line, Jim."

As she moved away his hand dropped on her shoulder with a grip.

"What do you intend to do, then?" he asked sternly.

Betty turned her head an instant and her brilliant, mocking face was close to his.

"Going to talk to that pretty boy saddling-up over there," she said, and walked across to little Parbury.

Jim stood very still, biting his lips.

"T-the devil," he said slowly. "What are women made of, I wonder."

And this, by the law of Nature, is a question that a man may ask himself his life long and never receive an answer in plain Saxon.

As the men took the leather again, stiffly and with yawning mouths, Hawkins called Jim up. His old face, chipped and battered by the weather to the roughness and colour of tree-bark, was harder and more rigid in the whitening moonlight.

"You know what you're about?" he said sharply. "Nine men out of ten couldn't trace an army over this land."

Jim grinned just a little.

"I s'pose I'm the tenth, then," he drawled, and dropped into the lead without one look back at Betty.

The earth was barren and bleached, with scant heather underfoot and naked gum-trees and sword-grass barring the way. Then it was tangle of all luscious-stemmed undergrowth, and whippingsaplings, and scratchy acacias, that cast sweet scents up in appeal as they went to death under the hoofs. And again it was bog, and

mosquitoes, and curses that stung Betty's ears more severely yet; and still again it was fierce struggling up flint-faces and razor-backed hill-flanks, and sliding to lower levels through the eternity of desolate bush.

Jim's sight was keen as the sight of the eagle-hawk where she hangs in blue heaven, drawing a bead with her eye on the rabbits at play in some green gully below. He took the trail on foot, stooping, with shut lips and that in his face which the tracker and the gamester know only. His honour lay at stake here before him—his honour, and the future of himself and of Roseen. He had no thought but to follow that trail until it landed him face to face with the men for whom he was answerable to the State. A late-broken twig showing oozing white drippings; a pressed-down cushion of moss; a stone up-turned from the ant-pocked bed of earth scored out like an Egyptian ruin—each told him, faithfully and certainly, all that he needed to know. Nick's chestnut had an imperfect frog on its off fore-foot, and Jim had seen the print twice in damp ground. And thereafter the trail was plain to him as the lines of a book, and he read it, half-running, and with no falter of mind or foot.

Cleet clicked his stirrups lightly, turning to little Parbury. He could track his man through mazes of streets and newspapers; but it was an unknown language that Jim spoke with the mouths of the earth that gibbered and laughed under the drifting moon-shadows.

"That fellow is just the chap," he said. "I haven't seen a black tracker do better. It's genius, and nothing but genius."

Little Parbury grunted. He was pink-and-white

and soft-fleshed, and the mosquitoes had discovered this long since.

"An ordinary man hasn't a hope with these bushmen," he agreed, slapping face and neck viciously. "Blast these things. Why can't I smoke two pipes at once! Yes, we don't all have genius handed out to us at the beginning of life—worse luck."

Concentration is the root, and genius the flower only. But because man does not see the root he generally believes that genius grows, mushroom-wise, in a night. And nothing which will last does that.

To Betty that day and night of loneliness in the bush was a reality that would trouble her dreams until she dreamed her last dream of all. But this night was more terrible yet. The presence of the silent men about her; sight of Hawkins' face, stone-hard, where the light struck; that black, stooping, tireless figure which was Jim and yet not the Jim that she knew; the blacker, snake-like thing at his heels, that was once Sinner before he came to take part in this noiseless, moving stream that would make an end—where? All these things crawled nearer, touching her spirit and chilling it with fear.

The mercilessness of Law, of Man, of Life itself, crushed her down; and the ways that they passed, speaking little and funeral-slow, were unknown and full of dread.

Once some cattle stirred in the distant bush, blew out their terror with bellows of rage, and crashed deeper into the night with noise that split the quiet dark into jagged edges of sound. Once a bat flapped across Betty's eyes on great wings, and its shrill squeak was sharp as violin-wire. Down in the undergrowth some unseen animal scuttled clumsily to the left, making

the horses snort in alarm, and through the slanted moonbeams an owl cut sideways on noiseless wing and vanished. The trees thinned and dwindled, and gray ghosts trailed floating moon-garments through them as the soft wind rocked the branches of gum and Murray-pine and belar.

The moon was at height, with no cloud to smirch her whiteness ; the last dregs of the bush ebbed away, and the open country lay sleeping on the breast of the sky where the star-twinkle proved that it was living and breathing. Blots of bush, of little townships, of swamp, splashed the distance like careless ink-drops ; and down to the right a lean mist crept, waving long fingers, and wiping them in the she-oaks. And, never-failing, never-faltering, that black, silent figure ahead hunted still for the blood-trail, and drew them along with it, unresisting. Here, where Australia's great heart throbbed nakedly before the God who made it, moved a mightier Power of hush and dread than Betty had guessed at before—a Power to whom life and death and man were but tools used for the building of the eternal on-going of the earth. Betty shivered and her lips went dry. Most truly this was a man's work only, even as Jim had said. Then she glanced at little Parbury, nodding fatly and half-asleep in his saddle, and she made courage her own again.

“Imagination is a fool-thing for any one to have,” she said. “The power to go to sleep—and to snore—at any time and every time is better than all the other powers of darkness.”

The night crawled by with laggard feet, and the silent searchers crawled with it. The moon sank down behind a feather-bed of clouds, and the sharp-cut shadows of

motionless trees and moving men were smudged out in a curtain of mist. Hawkins dropped from his horse with a quick word of command, the line halted, and Betty heard the sputter of a match.

"Till daybreak," said some one, and little tongues of fire licked up from a swiftly gathered pile of brushwood.

A foot crackled the sticks at her side, and Myall swerved with a snuffle of terror.

"He's what Mrs. Carleton would call a spirituous beast still," said Jim. "Or is he gittin' nerves like yourself, Betty?"

The quiet, reassuring voice, and the warmth of his hand on her arm, swung Betty's spirits up from the deeps.

"Do you mean nerves or nerve?" she demanded. "My goodness, Jim, you have small mercy on one's bones. It has been constant jar, jar, jar, to my spine till I'm——"

"Till you're wantin' somethin' to put in the jar? O' course. Come off there an' get a feed, Betty."

But she pressed a hand on his shoulder, stooping down to him.

"Jim, do you think you will get them easily?"

For a moment he stood silent. The leaping light behind cut his broad shoulders and well-set head in sharp relief, and for a flash Betty saw his occasional resemblance to Nick.

"No," he said slowly. "Nor do you. Betty, you never did a worse night's work in your life than when you let those two go. You know Nick as well as I do. You've given him more to face now, an' I wish on my soul that you hadn't a-done it."

"Are you—very angry with me, Jim?" she asked.

“No. I was. But Roseen said she guessed you did it for love, Betty. A woman don’t think o’ reason or . . . or herself when it comes to love, I suppose. Now, you git somethin’ to eat, an’ have a pitch wi’ your pretty boy. He’s settin’ in the smoke gettin’ ham-dried. But I guess the mosquitoes have about sucked him empty by now.”

He crossed over to Hawkins with his long, untired step, and Betty dropped from the creaking leather with shining eyes and shut teeth. Roseen had traded Betty’s honour for her own ; Betty’s love for her own ; Betty’s place in Jim’s respect and affection for her own. She unsaddled Myall with quick, steady hands, and her heart was cold-steel to that other woman who had won what she had lost.

“But you can’t tell him, Betty,” she told herself, working hotly over Myall’s sweating flanks with a wisp of fern. “You can’t tell him—ever. He used to want to take your whippings for you years ago, and he’s doing it now . . . and you can’t tell him. And you’re a little beast, Betty, because you thought he knew that Roseen was—what she is—and that he loved her in spite of it. Betty, you’re not fit to be in the same day with Jim ; and Roseen Mitchell——”

She turned an ants’-nest over with the toe of her boot, and her cheeks were flaming and her eyes brilliant with tears.

“Why do I want to hurt things when I’m being hurt myself,” she said. “Why do I want to hurt her ? Oh . . . if ever the chance comes to me to hurt her I hope I won’t take it. I hope I won’t take it.”

“Here, you kid,” shouted some one from the fire. “Come an’ fill up ’fore we git goin’ again. There’s no

sayin' when we'll git our nex' feed, seein' as we got a cast-iron steam-engine in the lead."

Betty heard Jim's laugh, and she dabbed her eyes with Myall's mane.

"Betty," she said. "Mr. Denis O'Flannigan has offered you a chew twice, and Mr. Harris has wanted to know where you got your hair cut. Do you think you'd like the pretty boy to ask what you have been crying for—though his own eyes look more like boiled periwinkles than anything else just now?"

And at daybreak the strain and the intensity of the hunt fell on the hunters again, and through the hot hours under the unclouded sky, with the bare earth livid beneath, they pressed forward; fast and more fast as the track lay clear; hauling back in a sickening wait while Jim, flat on his stomach, sought with eyes sharp as augers for the displacement of a stone or the cut-out of a speck of hard earth, or the broken blade of a grass-clump. Rock-wallabies and peering possums watched curiously from tree-hollows and edged teeth of rock; an old man kangaroo lumbered near in the moonlight, and fled again with the beat of his tail in the rocks echoing like the thumping of blasting-powder. The lyre-birds screeched derision at them; the hot sun and the white moon mocked them; and hour by hour the strain grew tenser and the halts shorter, and the eager bloodhound look came into each man's eyes and stayed there.

Hour by hour, through a night and a day and a night again. And Betty was speechless and deadly weary; sitting her saddle with the white, stern face and the erect young body that Jim remembered in pictures of Joan of Arc, and hiding behind the maiden-

hood of her eyes that which would have told Jim the truth.

Hour by hour, through the searing wind and the dumb stillness when the air clogged in their lungs. Hour by hour through the bitter of the moon-white night, when tree and leaf stood out as if cast in steel, and the coming grip of winter on the high lands chilled their bones and numbed their hands on the reins. To Betty there had never been end or beginning to this. The hunt was up, stern and swift and relentless. By day the black shadows ran before them, snuffing up the trail like eager dogs that go panting with hanging tongues. By night the land lay empty, waiting, helpless, and Jim took what he wanted from it and left it behind. And ever the awful truth pressed down on her shoulders. It was Nick whom Jim was hunting with those keen eyes that knew all, and those untiring limbs that defied all. Nick, who was more than brother to him in all but the blood-bond. Nick, who once had carried her on his back, and sung child-songs with her before the kitchen fire, and romped with her in the old garden-corners.

Hour by hour Hawkins' hard face grew more merciless, and the roundness left little Parbury's cheeks, and something of the same hollow intentness sat there that Jim showed, and Cleet showed, and the other men beside him. There was no quarter, there was no relenting, there was no end but one. And the end came short and sharp at a midday when the sun flared on them full, and the rocky ledge they were treading sent up heat like the floor of a furnace.

Jim slewed Miladi round, and spoke for five brief minutes with Hawkins. And those watching behind

knew that the rope which Jim was hauling in was near its finish. Then Hawkins turned in the saddle.

"Men," he said. "Gurugal is just below us, and Jim believes that we will find them there. Don't ask me how he knows." A grim smile touched the straight lips a moment. "He vouches for it, and we are following him blind. Now . . . take your orders!"

He gave them, sharp, direct, and clear. And each man at the telling shook up his rein and passed Jim down the track. Hawkins looked at Betty.

"Mr. Saltire says you are to be trusted, my lad," he said. "Go down with Jim, and do as he tells you. I'll come across you later. Go."

Jim leaned to her once as they swung down the track together.

"Betty, listen to me," he said. "You've got the sand o' ten men, but I've got more. Don't you put your fingers into this or you'll get nipped. I'm warnin' you as I'd warn a man, an', by God! I'll treat you as I'd treat a man if you get in the way to-day."

Betty's laugh was half-hysterical.

"Mr. Saltire says I'm to be trusted," she said.

"If it was you Saltire meant. There's more behind this than you mean to tell; but what you do tell has always been truth so far. Will you answer me true now, Betty?"

The long-drawn pain of this chase was in his eyes, in his voice, even as Betty knew that it was in his heart.

"Yes," she said. "If I answer at all it will be the truth."

"If I send you on a message will you carry it—honest?"

Then Betty laughed. A rollicking round laugh such as she had not known was left in her.

"Honest Injun," she said. And then the old password of their childhood brought tears swift on the laugh.

"Oh, Jim," she cried. "I know you'd sooner do anything else——"

"Yes. Don't talk o' that, Betty. Git off. We're leavin' the horses behind this old shed, an' you'll come back for 'em when I send you. We must come into Gurugal quiet—an' we're not goin' to take long about it."

Outside the first hotel Jim glanced at her.

"Wait out here for me," he said, and pushed wide the swinging doors of the bar.

The smell of stale drinks and uncleanness, and the talk of coarse voices came out to Betty. She shuddered, kicking a strip of banana-peel into the dirty gutter. A child crawled up on hands and knees to drag at her boot-lace, and, in stooping to him, Betty forgot for the moment until Jim's hand fell on her shoulder.

"They're at Bell's—round the corner," he said, low and sharply. "I want you to hunt up any of our men you can, and send them along. And then bring down the horses. Tell our chaps they needn't stop to clean their teeth if it's all the same to them."

He was loosening his revolver and feeling for his handcuffs as he spoke. Betty gripped his arm suddenly.

"Jim," she gasped. "Jim . . . you'll be careful. . . ."

He looked at her. There was no reproach in his face, no anger. Betty remembered afterwards only a great and tender pity.

"I'll be careful of him all I can—for your sake, old girl," he said, and left her.

Betty's heart stood still. Why was she born to set her world upside down? Then she ran up the street, knocking the wind out of Hawkins, who grabbed her collar and proceeded to curse her.

But her quick sentence broke the words in his mouth. He pelted down the gray, desolate street with his lean shoulders humped, and Betty took little Parbury on the quarter and sent him after his chief. Then she climbed the hill to the horses, and stopped her ears against Myall's neck.

"If they shoot," she whispered over and yet again. "If they shoot. Oh—if they shoot Jim."

Jim was dreading more than that as he came with his long, easy step through the foul little bar at Bell's and into the parlour beyond. It was a low, unplastered room, smelling of last year's smoke and beer, and buzzing with flies. A man lay on a horse-hair couch, with the yellow light from the dirty window-blind slanting through on him. A second man was sleeping on two chairs by the side-wall. But they were on their feet as the door opened, and Jack West had a chair swung up for barricade.

Nick's eyes were bloodshot, and his limbs shook. He ripped out a black oath of fury, and face and body were fearless.

"She's trapped us," he shouted. "Jack, Roseen's trapped us. She swore Jim didn't mean to come after——"

The little dirty room reeled and jumped round Jim. The flies buzzed loud in his ears, and the hand covering Nick dropped.

“Roseen?” he said, lifting his mind on to the word with effort.

Nick laughed. The savageness that makes a scorpion turn on itself and sting was alive in him.

“Roseen,” he said. “What’s that little she-devil up to now? She brought us the key and said you wanted us to clear, and now she sends you after us. By ——!”

It was sight of Hawkins’ hooked nose just behind. Nick glanced an instant at Jack West.

“Make a bolt for it,” he shouted, and leaped at Jim, bearing him back into Hawkins’ arms. Jim felt him spring over as Hawkins dropped with a grunt, and, twisting on the door-sill, he heard little Parbury’s shrill pipe and saw the sharp flash as Nick’s revolver answered him.

With the veins of his head bursting, and the blood roaring down them, he flung Hawkins free and came to his feet as little Parbury sank—just as a sand-castle sinks when the tide grips it.

“The brain-death,” said something loud in his ears, and he jumped past the boy, with fierce eyes searching for Nick.

The shot had brought women from their houses as a kick on a bee-hive brings bees. Beyond the chattering, running crowd Jim saw Nick dodge up the street to the smithy, and his mind took understanding without knowing it. The horses were there, and—where was Betty? And then Betty thrust a rein in his hand.

Little Parbury’s blood laid the dust at her feet, and her face was whiter than his. Jim did not look at her. But he caught the rein, and cast himself on the saddle. Then Miladi’s hoofs cut fire from the flint of the street

as Jim raced her up it, gripping fiercely by the thighs and sending the lust of the hunt through her also.

Mechanically Betty hooked Myall to the horse-rail. Within she saw Jack West submit to the handcuffs in the suave, gentlemanly manner that never deserted him in emergencies. She heard the flies buzz and hum as they came out, smelling blood, and she heard many voices speaking round the still heap that had been little Parbury.

Then she went away, walking slowly through the dust, with feet that dragged and a brain that understood nothing. Without a clean, bright-windowed hotel, where a parrot swung in a cage, talking cheerfully, she sat down, and laid her head on the end of the bench. And then the horror and the dread and the weariness turned to soothing black, and went out, and consciousness put her in the arms of oblivion and left her there.

CHAPTER XIV

HOW NICK STRUCK DEAD FINISH

ALL about Betty men were talking. The harsh, slow twang of the Australian up-country voice, and the clatter of hoofs jerked her suddenly into understanding, and thereafter to her feet. Hawkins stood on the sideway, shouting, and Cleet pulled a blown hack across the street to him, bending low in the saddle. His sharp, ratty face was streaked with sweat, and there was a flicker of a grin on his thin lips.

“Trust a woman for making the hell and all of a business when she gets into it,” he said. “Yes, we’ve lost him. Kyneton got him covered on the cliff-edge, and he wheeled his horse and rode slap over it. That comes of a woman’s meddling.”

Hawkins let out a quick oath of dismay.

“Dead, is he?” he demanded. “And Parbury dead. Great Heavens! we’re paying through the nose for this. Where’s Kyneton?”

“Coming.” Cleet turned in the saddle. “Here he is. We’ll have to get into the gully round the other way, he says. And we’ll need a cart——”

Betty caught at the wall. Every word battered on her brain, and each hurt like little pellets of hail. Jim came up the street at a hand-gallop; dropped off before Hawkins, and saluted. The dust of the way was white

on his shoulders, and dark on the drawn lines of his face. And that face was such as Betty had not believed could ever belong to Jim. He spoke to Hawkins, quick and low. Then he crossed the side-walk with unsteady feet. Betty moved, touching his arm.

"Jim," she said in a whisper. "Jim——?"

Jim looked at her with strained eyes. Before his sight still was Nick, reining back the chestnut on the edge of the cliff, with the glare of light over him and the six-hundred-foot drop behind. In his ears still were Nick's last words, with the reckless laugh of the old days to round them.

"Let her go, Jim. By the Lord! she's slipped us all up. Jim . . . I'm strikin' Dead Finish first."

He put Betty aside with hands that did not feel her.

"Don't," he said. "Nick is dead. I must go. . . ."

She heard him walk into the bar, asking questions, direct and necessary. She saw him come out and pass down the street with Hawkins and Cleet. And she dropped back on her bench with great bells tolling in her ears and great black shapeless shapes crawling on her eyeballs. The cruel glare of the day ate into the dusty street, and the squalid houses, and the dull gum-trees along the sidewalk. . . . The earth was empty and barren and full of dread. Betty felt burned dry to the centre of her soul. She got to her feet again, and staggered into the bar as the last man dribbled out in wake of the crowd setting toward the gully.

A fresh-faced motherly woman was washing glasses behind the bar, and Betty came to her slowly, and held the edge of the wood in both hands, striving to command her voice. For the wild desire was on her to cast

herself on the woman's shoulder, and cry as she had not cried many times in her life.

The motherly woman put down the glass and came near. She looked at Betty keenly, and Betty felt the blood scorch her face. Then she said softly :

"What a-they fellers bin about sellin' drink to a boy like you ! No, no ; you'll get no more here, son, an' if I had my way there'd not a boy in the whole o' the country get it while as the down was on his cheek yet."

"I'm not d-drunk," said Betty, with a hint of laughter and weeping in her voice.

The woman reached a hand and laid it on Betty's arm.

"No need o' lies, son," she said, with a tender pity. "You ha' bin, an' you come here to get it again. I seen plenty young fellers at that game before now. But you'll not get it here——"

"I don't want it," said Betty. "If I—oh, if I could have a cup of tea, please."

The woman's eyes searched hers. Betty's fell. Then the woman pushed open the bar-parlour door.

"You come along in here, an' I'll get yer some tea," she said. "What in the land hev you bin a-doin' of to look that petered out ?"

"I came with the police," said Betty. "We've been riding hard for some days——"

The low, quiet room seemed suddenly filled with the clapping of heavy wings. The worn oilcloth on floor and table, and the coloured newspaper-prints on the walls leapt up and disappeared. Sound and sight left her in a mighty throe of grief, then came painfully back with the sense of spirit blistering her mouth and bearded faces staring at her. She struggled,

and kindly hands forced her back, and a rough, kindly voice came out of somewhere.

"See here, kid, you kip quiet or you'll be frightenin' the missus out of her wits agin. What? No, mother; he ain't gone off the hooks this time, the young rip. Hey? Want ter sit up? Well . . . you're a pretty bunch o' tricks, you are."

Betty reached for the wooden end of the sofa which held her, and pulled herself into sitting position. The motherly face peered at her between the shoulders of a couple of men, giving her courage.

"I'm all right," she said. "I was tired, and the sun—"

The second man chuckled, rubbing a hand over his hairy arm.

"You know how to tell it," he said. "It's allers the sun, ain't it, Cobb? But it's got you down proper. Who did yer come with, eh? Or do they let you loose on yer own?"

"I came with the police," said Betty again. "Is Jim back? I—I mean Constable Kyneton. He—I came with him."

"Jim Kyneton? Oh!" The man straightened, turning to the motherly woman. "Missus, he's along wi' Jim o' the Ranges. That's good enough fer me—an' fer you too, old woman."

"I don't ask his character of a sick man, John, an' you know that well. Are you feelin' better, my dear? Lor', you did give me a turn. Lie you down again, son. My! what a girly face he's got on him, John. There, I wasn't meanin' to affront yer. You'll be all right when yer beard comes. I'll stay wi' you while yer drinks yer tea. John, you'll let me know when they brings the body back?"

Betty grew sick again. But it was the natural instinct of the motherly woman's class, and her heart was kind.

"Now," she said, and shook the sofa as she settled her bulk on the end of it. "You tell me how Jim o' the Ranges is gettin' on these days. I never was that surprised before when I seed him walk in jus' now, wi' a uniform an' a face to scare a kookaburra. He's bin seein' trouble since he was up this way four year ago . . . an' a more clean-livin', rowdier, merrier young chap I never expec's to see in heaven—if ever they gets time for larkin' there. But Jim'll find time if there is any. If he don't pull the tail-feathers out o' some old angel to make shuttle-cocks wi', he ain't the Jim I used ter know."

"Perhaps he won't be there," said Betty, choking over her tea.

"Then there won't be a heaven," said the motherly woman. "Did ever he tell yer what he did to my Willie, what was goin' the way you're goin' now, an' worse? Drinkin' steady, Willie was, an' couldn't stan' up ter it, bein' weakly from his birth. Jim, he cud take his tot wi' the rest, an' not know it. Never got drunk, yer know, an' never allowed liberties. But jes' takin' the days as they come an' shovellin' 'em off over his shoulder. Then one day he found me howlin' blue murder over thinkin' o' the way Willie was goin', an' he sets down beside me on the sofia—same as I'm doin' wi' you, an' he wheedles it all out o' me, like as a tree-runner chasin' bugs. An' I dries me eyes an' tells him. 'Jim,' I says, 'if talkin' was any good I've did it till me tongue blistered. An' if leatherin' 'im was any good,' I says, 'big boy as he is,' I says, 'his father

has did it till he's had ter hev more nips a day fer strengthenin' than is good fer *him*,' I says. 'So I ain't got no hope but fer ter lay him in a drunkard's grave,' I says. 'An' I doubts if he'll lay straight,' I says, 'him not havin' stood straight this six months.' Then Jim he stud up. You know that slow way he has o' unpackin' hisself, like a cat stretchin' in the sun ? "

"Yes," said Betty. The horror in the outer day had dulled for the instant, and memory of Jim's face as she saw it last was less keen.

"Well, Jim, he stud up, larfin' a bit. 'Mrs. Cobb,' he says. 'You leave Bill ter me,' he says. 'I got a spoke I can put in that feller's wheel,' he says. 'An' I bet yer nips I'll do it,' he says. An' wi' that he goes out larfin' some more, an' in harf-a-nour he brings Willie back. Willie was a bit sulky, an' a good bit proud o' havin' Jim's arm round his shoulder—Jim bein' rather stand-offish, yer know. An' 'Mrs. Cobb,' he says, 'give us a nip o' lemonade ter celebrate wi',' he says. 'Me an' Bill hev gone an' signed up a pledge fer a year,' he says. And they had, sure as I'm tellin' yer. An' they kep' it, though Willie wud a-gone under a hundred times wi' all the fellers ready ter chiack an' jeer a chap as won't drink with 'em. But Jim's got a slick tongue for all he ain't a blow-hard talker, an' he rung in more'n Willie afore he went north. Tell you, he'll be haulin' you up wi' a round turn before long, an' do yer good too, son. I reckon you'd better not be mindin' it from him."

"No," said Betty, with the flicker of a smile. "I won't be minding it from him."

She got to her feet stiffly, and crossed over to the

window. The evening air blew cooler in her face, and in the west great clouds banked before the sun, dull green, with angry edges of crimson.

"It will soon be dark," she said. "Do you—do you think they will come before long?"

Mrs. Cobb brought her fat face over Betty's shoulder, staring down the street. At the moment it was empty. Then three boys showed, running. They were the forefront of the male inhabitants of Gurugal; and others came, in clumps, singly, in twos, riding, running, driving ahead of the van. Mrs. Cobb sucked in her lips eagerly.

"They're bringin' the body," she said. "I say, did Jim know the feller, eh?"

"Yes," said Betty, and the word caught in her throat.

"A-ye, that's a pity. That's a crool pity. Jim he was allers soft-hearted, though I've seed him act like a tiger——"

Betty had ceased to listen. Behind the thick of the horses and men and carts came another cart, moving slowly, with the driver sitting on the shaft. In the cart lay something covered by a blue common blanket; and behind the cart rode Jim, with one hand thrust in his tunic and his chin on his breast. Something in the utter despondency of the attitude, some note of likeness between the blue uniform and the blue blanket in the cart, drove the truth home to her heart with a swift, pitiless stab. It was Nick who lay dead in the cart, and it was Jim who had forced death on the foster-brother whom he had loved all his life through. Betty stood unmoving, with hands clenched tight. She did not hear Mrs. Cobb bustle out, slamming the

door behind. She did not hear the whispered talk at the door, or the clatter of feet on the rough, unmade side-walk. Only she heard the roll of the cart as it passed down the street and out of her sight; and she slid to her knees, and stayed there, while the green bank of clouds grew black and the blood-red smudge below them was lost in the night.

Then Mrs. Cobb came back, treading heavily, and wiping her hands on her apron.

"Dear heart," she said, half-sobbing. "It jus' goed to my marrer to see him, an' so I'm tellin' yer. Are yer there still, son? Well, they're sayin' as it was his foster-brother—Jim's foster-brother—an' they got him an' the young feller he shot a-lyin' up on the supper table in the Town Hall, where I will say they're lookin' beautiful. An' yer'd best be comin' out fer some tea, son, before all the crowd hev finished it off."

"Where's Jim?" said Betty, standing up suddenly.

"In the Town 'All. He won't come out, though we tried him ever so. Mrs. Malony says as it ain't safer leave him there lookin' that bad, an' wi' a gun on to him, an' shootin' in the air as yer might say. But I says——"

"I'm going to him," said Betty.

She wheeled, slipped out of the low window, and ran down the street in the dark. Knots of men stood about, showing glinting pipe-dottles, and some one tried to stop her. But she swerved from him, gained the ugly square bulk of the little wooden Town Hall, pushed the door open, and crept in. After the half-light without the hall gave only black dark to her eyes, and the slow, heavy tread of a man going up and down, and up again, along the strip of cocoanut matting

laid between the rows of seats. Silence, and the presence of the unseen dead were here, and Betty took her breath with a gasp. Then the faint light from the platform showed her Jim's shoulders as he swerved and came forward, gripping her arm.

"Who's that? Didn't I say——" Then he loosed her, and his voice changed. "Betty," he said. "Poor Betty. I'd forgot you. Have you had anythin' to eat to-day?"

Betty's eyes brimmed suddenly. Behind him, in the dimness of the candle-light, the white outlines on the long table grew to her sight. And Jim, while guarding these, had remembered her hunger.

"I—didn't want anything," she said. "Oh, Jim, come back and rest. You must be so—so tired."

The fit words would not come. Jim turned from her again, heavily.

"I don't feel quite like restin', thanks," he said, and his tone had lost its verve. "You go back, Betty. I'm all right here."

He fell back to the even tread again. Down, and up, and down; with head bent, and hands linked behind him, and the slow, dragging step of weariness growing slower, but still unfaltering. Betty slid into a form near the gangway, and leaned her forehead on the back of the form in front. Vaguely she felt as though she were in church, and she sought for prayers which would not come. Those still shapes on the distant table, invested with majesty as Life never invests a human, had swept all crudeness from the ugly, unlined shell of the hall, from the dead decorations of a past dance withering yet on their nails, from the bare, whitewashed windows, and the rows of plain wooden forms. A man

was dead, and a man was mourning him in silence, and the stern nakedness of the tragedy thrust woman's soft tears aside.

Jim's heavy tread stopped. He spoke at her elbow.

"Betty, I have got to apologise to you. I know now it was Roseen took that key, an' not you. I suppose you knew, an' you didn't tell. I beg your pardon for doubtin' you, Betty."

The utter repression of the tone gave Betty close understanding of that which Jim would never put into words. There was poison in this wound, poison that had struck at the very core of the man. And she did not know if the strength of Jim's nature would fight it.

"Jim," she cried, with her great love and pity swamp-
ing all else beside. "Oh, Jim, forget that. It doesn't matter. Jim, perhaps she did not mean——"

"It matters that I've been layin' the blame where it never belonged; an' a man's got to act straight, whatever comes or goes. Don't say any more, Betty. I was too ready to think it was you."

"I wish it had been," she sobbed.

And in her agony of heart she meant it. Roseen had struck at Jim's honour, at his love, at all that Nick meant to him, when she did this thing. And—what was left for Jim now? She heard him catch his breath sharply.

"Wishin' never did anythin' yet," he said.

He stood still, struggling to bring his exhausted brain to bear on the something that was yet to be said. Suddenly he found it, saying it straightly.

"I've been thinkin' you loved Nick, Betty. If you

feel you've a better right here beside him to-night, I'll go or stay, just as you tell me."

"No. No. Never, Jim. I never loved Nick . . . not in that way."

The sharp, distinct syllables seemed to cut the gloom of the little hall, and Betty drew back, nervously. Out of that mysterious silence that wrapped him would Nick hear and resent it? Jim rubbed his hand over his eyes.

"Then will you go, Betty?" he said. "I don't feel like talkin', an' I'd rather be by myself. Mrs. Cobb will give you anythin' you want if you use my name. You're not afraid to go back there by yourself, are you?"

His chivalrous thought for her in the midst of his heartbreak blinded Betty's eyes again.

"No," she said. "I can find my way, thanks."

But at the door she halted, looking back. Jim was pacing the matting again with heart and brain gone out to meet the despair which was over-setting that belief in God which had ruled his life.

"I can't go," she whispered. "I don't know. I'm frightened. I'm frightened."

But it was not for herself that she felt fear. By her very nature a woman's protecting instinct is strong, and there was that in Jim's face which waked the instinct in Betty.

Through the hours that lightened with the moon, and darkened with its setting, Jim walked the gangway in strife with the grief and the wild anger that mocked at him. The strength of his flesh and muscles was too great for exhaustion fully to dull his brain, and the whole truth shone clean and clear before him. Bible

words with Katherine's intonation yet clinging to them spoke themselves in his ears :

"And I said in my strength, I shall never be moved."

He stopped to listen to them, and his face twitched.

"In my strength," he said slowly. "An' I gave it up to her. Doin' the wrong an' knowin' it. Doin' the wrong . . . God! I knew what she was, an' you knew that I knew it. An' you're makin' sure I'll know what hell's like before I git to it. That's what I'm learnin' now."

Under the white light of morning he went up to the platform. The kerosene lamps, stuck in the wall, had gone out in smoke, and the greasy smell of them lay thick on the air. Earth's sordid commonplace showed in the bare, unplanned table, and the dirty floor. Death's far-reaching grandeur showed in the strong, straight lines of the two men who lay under the sheets. Jim passed by little Parbury and stood by Nick. With steady hand he pulled the covering from the face and looked down on it. The mocking laughter that had twisted it, and that had hurt his memory, was gone, and Nick's features had set into the placid lines of untroubled youth again.

For very long Jim stood still, with the growing morning without dimmed by the whitened windows. The strong wind that Hack had predicted was sweeping down on him and his foundations were loosened.

"You've done with it all, you lucky beggar," he said, half-aloud. "By heaven, Nick, if I had a little more nerve I'd be done with it too." He jerked the sheet lower, and shut his hand over the cold ones. "You're

right, old man," he said. "She's slipped us all up. But I'll let her go, now, an' we'll shake on that."

The chill of the flesh ran up his arm to his heart, and he straightened the sheet again, speaking through stiff lips.

"Good-bye, old man. I chose her instead o' you. But I'm payin' for it."

When the warm air of the morning slid into the hall Betty woke to Jim's touch on her shoulder. She sat up stiffly, rubbing her eyes.

"I thought you'd gone last night," said Jim gently. "You shouldn't a-stayed here, Betty. Come along down to Mrs. Cobb's, an' she'll give us some breakfast."

Betty shivered, standing up. To outside influences Jim was stone just now, and she was afraid of him. Together and in silence they went out to the flood of yellow daylight, and the song of birds, and the voices of children, and the barking of dogs. Day seemed to strike eyes and ears with a physical pain, and Betty slid into a chair at the long breakfast-table, feeling sick and giddy and very near to tears. Jim halted by Hawkins' chair for some minutes. Then he dropped on the seat next to Betty, and began his meal in a quiet indifference that stilled the curious tongues about him.

Mrs. Cobb brought his teacup herself, and her round, comely face was anxious.

"You never got no eatin' nor no sleep here last night, Jim," she said. "Did you have any, then?"

Jim smiled up at her.

"I had all I wanted, thanks," he said lightly. "Mrs. Cobb, there's cream in this tea."

"I'd give you the cow in it if you was wantin' it, my boy," she said, and patted his shoulder. "What

are you goin' to do wi' that young shaver beside yer, Jim ? ”

Jim smiled again, looking at Betty. And only Betty knew that there was no smile in his eyes.

“ I'll never make a man of him, Mrs. Cobb, I'm afraid,” he said. “ How is Bill getting on ? ”

“ Well now, Jim, he—” But Betty lost the rest of it. The self-control that was Jim's had not come to her yet, and the lump in her throat seemed to choke her.

Jim spoke to her little, but he made her eat and drink. Then he stooped to her as the men rose about them.

“ Come down the street wi' me a minute,” he said. “ I got somethin' to say to you.”

He said it curtly, with Hawkins and Cleet beating impatient heels on the sideway.

“ Betty, I'll have a lot to see to this mornin', an', as Mrs. Cobb will be busy, I don't want you to be knockin' about here. You go up to that hill across there where the big wattles are, an' I'll come an' tell you what's to do next soon as I can. If I don't turn up before dinner-time you come an' tucker, an' then go back. You can amuse yourself wi' a book or somethin', can't you ? I'll git one from Mrs. Cobb.”

The verb struck Betty's ear curiously.

“ I can always amuse myself, thanks,” she said. “ Yes, you can get me a book if you like, Jim.”

But up on the hill under the wattles she did not read it. She knew something of that which Jim would have to see to this morning, and more than she knew she feared. And what this day would bring to herself and to Jim she did not know.

It was very still on the hill-top. The clear air and the sky of sheerest blue brought the gum-trees across the little valley close and vivid, with their white, twisted branches and their bunched dull leaves. Threading through them, in search of blossom, dipped and squabbled the gray wattle-birds, with their harsh, noisy clatter making a regular under-current to the calls of magpie and rosella, and the strong, glorious song of one unseen lark. Right, left, and before, rose rounded bush-hills, with leaf and stem distinct and gleaming in the freshness of the morning light. Below sat the little township, with the white track twisting out of it and the white smoke twisting up to the sky. On the distance haze lay like a transparent veil, making all of every-day life mysterious and beautiful. Sweet well-known scents of gum-blossom and wattle and musk and of faint wood-smoke came to Betty, and peace breathed in the soft breeze that murmured in the grasses.

It was the world that Jim loved, and Betty hid her face from it and cried until her tears were spent. For she had begun to doubt if ever Jim would love it again.

Glory had gone off the earth, and the hard light of midday was shut over it, when Jim came up to the hill-top. He moved heavily, and he stood in his stiff, drill attitude, looking down on her.

"I know what you came for now, Betty," he said. "Hawkins was gittin' wires an' sendin' them all yesterday, an' he's bin doin' the same to-day. I'm clear. But I got to git straight back to Buntree fast as I can do it. They haven't rounded the other men yet. What made you do all this much for me, Betty?"

Betty sat up and looked at him. And she lied.

"I did it for auntie," she said. "I would do more than that for her."

"She'll thank you," said Jim. "Better than I can. I don't feel like thankin' you jus' now, Betty. You mustn't think me a brute."

Betty understood. Had she never come, Nick might still have been living and free. She pulled up the grass with little spurts of earth, saying nothing.

"I've got to start this afternoon," said Jim. "An' I must ride for all I know. I've arranged for you to go across to Bright with Hawkins and the rest, Betty. He'll look after you all right. If you'd let me tell him who you are, you'd have no trouble at all."

Sinner's hot tongue lapped Betty's cheek. She drew the rough head under her chin, staring yet at Jim. He was like a man whose reserve of strength has run out, leaving him derelict. For the hand on the wheel is useless when the coal driving the vessel is spent.

"I am coming with you," she said quietly.

"You can't. I'm goin' to make it in two days hard. There's more to do yet. I can't have you along, Betty."

"You've got to. Sinner and I are both coming—aren't we, boy?"

Sinner growled in pure delight of her fondling hands. Jim looked down on them without interest.

"They'll be startin' in an hour," he said. "Come down an' git somethin' to eat, Betty. I saw to Myall. You'll git into Bright to-morrow, an' you can take the train down far as Pingelap, an' ride home from there. You can't lose your way, Betty."

"Not with you to guide me," said Betty. "Didn't you hear me say I was coming with you, Jim?"

Jim's face changed. Anger shook the strong grip whereby he held himself, and his eyes hurt her, meeting hers.

"I tell you I'm goin' alone," he said. "I can't argue, Betty. You do as you're told."

Betty pulled her feet in, linking her hands round her knees. The rough bare head showed a nimbus where the curling ends caught the light, and her thrown-back face was brilliant and coaxing. She was playing for what was dearer to her than herself. For she dreaded unspeakably all that those two days of bush loneliness might mean to Jim just now.

"I can argue," she said. "And I'm not going to do as I'm told. If you want me to go with Hawkins you'll have to carry me down, and I'll cry every step of the way. And I'd look nice doing that in your clothes."

A flicker of laughter crossed Jim's face.

"Betty, please," he said. "If I ask you."

Betty shook her head. She looked a daring, mischievous boy only. But the spirit in her was that of a woman who loves without thought of self.

"Can't do it, Jim," she said. "Sinner and I are coming with you."

Jim whitened, and she saw his fingers twitch.

"I won't have you," he said. "There are some times when a man's got to be alone, an' I've got to be alone now. I should think you might understand that. You can guess at least somethin' of what this has been to me. I will not have any one with me."

"I'll ride behind, then. But I'm coming, Jim.

You can't help it, so you might just as well be nice about it."

Her breath stopped as she looked up at him. There was one thing only that she never could have suffered to read in Jim's eyes. And that one thing was not there. Wrath she saw; a desperation that scarcely could be hid; weariness of flesh and spirit. But there was no contempt, and she felt her heart beat again.

"Come, then, if you will come," he said slowly. "I thought you were more generous, Betty. I'm leavin' at eleven. Get Mrs. Cobb to fill your tucker-bag."

He went down the hill, never looking at her again. And Betty leaned her head on a rough wattle-bole, watching him idly. Her eyes were dry, and her heart was very tired. But, deep below understanding, intuition told her that she had done right. Torture of mind was gripping Jim too fiercely for the great silences of the bush to work their will on him alone. And she guessed at the temptation which that little revolver might bring to him.

"But, O God!" she said, speaking in direct words. "It is very hard to be a girl. I don't think you would have made girls if you'd known how hard it is sometimes. What will he think of me about this? I'm afraid to wonder what he will think of me."

CHAPTER XV

“HE WILL GET UP AGAIN”

OVER the brown grass levels, and the bush-hills, and the gullies of rock and flint, a narrow ribbon of track fluttered and twisted. It was white under the wide eyes of the day; it was wine-red with the flush of sunset; it was a livid scar on the heart of the earth when night came. Betty knew every change of it more clearly than she knew the changes of her own heart; for she and Jim had followed the track since yesterday noon, and now the second night was very near. The sky was vivid blue, with scarlet clouds shredded across it. Jagged light stabbed through the bush, striking the young tips of the gums to quivering flame. Rosellas and parrakeets and grass-parrots made dazzling splashes of colour as they dipped along the track ahead with the blaze of the sunset on them. The white underwings of one low-flying magpie turned blood-red with the swamping death-glory, and the blood-red touched Betty's face for an instant as Jim looked at her. Then he spoke for the first time in many hours.

“You're gettin' tired, Betty. We'll sling it up for to-night as soon as we git to the river.”

“Jim, I can go on. Myall is a bit tired, but——”

“He's not as near done as you are. We'll sling it up, an' go on at dawn.”

His face set into the still lines again. He looked straight ahead, down the long wisp of track between the eternal gums. The light shifted, dulled, and went out. The murmur of a river came faintly, and all the great chatter and calling of birds stopped sharp and sudden. Far off the scream of a black cockatoo made harsh the falling twilight, and the gum-branches began to show ghostly-white among the gray leaves. All this had its meaning once for Jim. Now he looked on it and heard it, and did not care. Betty, pounding wearily alongside, meant nothing to him. Nick, laid straightly in the grave which the little black-bearded Gurugal parson had refused to read God's Word over, meant nothing to him. Roseen, with the clinging lips, and the clear eyes that had damned his soul, meant nothing either. He was numb with the grip of the shock and with physical exhaustion, and only his duty held his feet in the stirrups and his hand on the rein. Saltire had commanded him to come back. For there was the Kid yet to bring to justice.

The wash of the river among rocks grew loud and full. Out of the old dead tree-boles bright eyes blinked and dipped from sight. The noises of the night began to waken, and a branch cracked where a flying-squirrel sprang. Jim pulled up, looking again at Betty.

"This'll do," he said. "There's a clump o' sassafras down the bank where you can sleep soft."

"Very well," said Betty, and staggered stiffly as she dropped to the ground. Jim's hand came over hers.

"Give me Myall," he said. "I'll see to him."

Betty stood a moment, watching the blurr of the bodies move in the gloom. Then she fell on the earth, face down. There was the fire to light and the tucker-

bag to open, but power of thought and deed had left her.

“I . . . can’t,” she said. “Oh, what shall I do? If I knock up I’ll stop him. And he will be so angry.”

Then she heard Jim’s step beside her and felt his arms lift her up.

“Betty,” he said.

Across great distances she surely answered him. But the weight on limbs and eyelids did not lessen. Vaguely she knew that Jim held her, seeking something. Her teeth were forced open, and hot fire ran down her throat, rousing her to an agony of shivering and choking. She fought for words.

“I . . . I’m all right. Jim, don’t be angry. I can go on. . . .”

“Betty,” said Jim, and the humanity had come back to his voice. “Betty, you poor old girl, what have I been doin’ to you! Keep still, dear, while I get the fire goin’ an’ some tucker for you. Lord, Betty, you’re clean played out, an’ I never thought of you once.”

He went about his work deftly, quickly. But the numbness in him was jarred to sense, and sorrow began to lift her head and look him in the eyes. He turned from her. There was something to do just now, and he did it, quietly, gently; until Betty lay rolled in her blanket by the dying fire, and he sat with his feet to the embers, and smoked, with another black night to face.

The fire sank lower. Its red whispering lips grew gray. A little breeze moaned through the wire-grass, scattering the gray ash on Jim’s feet. He remembered words that his heart had said over Nick yesterday.

“Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust . . . in sure and certain hope. . . .”

And here his spirit failed him. Hope and belief were gone, crushed out in the wine-press of merciless reality. And then the first stab of agony caught him full, driving him to his feet. He had loved the dead man and the living woman better than all things in earth and heaven; and Nick was dead to him for life, but Roseen was dead to him for eternity. Understanding came with stern finger to point him back to his own part in this, and for a little the manhood in him was wrenched from its bearings, and the danger that Betty had feared came near to him.

From out of her blanket Betty watched him with tireless eyes. Every nerve was alert and ready if he should need her, and weariness was gone before the love that gave her strength. In the thicker dark shutting down she lost his outline, and then fear called out in her.

“Jim. Oh, Jim. Come. I want you.”

The words brought Jim back from the unbottomed hell wherein his feet were set. He lifted his head, holding to comprehension with an effort.

“What is it?” he said thickly. “Who’s callin’?”

“It’s Betty. Oh, Jim; I’m so frightened. I want auntie. . . .”

It was the strongest note she knew, and she struck it with all her force. And something in Jim answered to it. Without speech he crossed to the fire, flung on dry litter of leaves and grass until it leapt up gladly, and came to Betty’s side.

“I reckon you’ll have to make shift wi’ me instead o’ auntie for a while, old girl,” he said. “See here, how will this do?”

He picked her up, carrying her within the brightness of the firelight. Then he dropped down with his back to a tree-bole, and drew her head into the hollow of his shoulder.

“I’m goin’ to stroke your forehead, Betty,” he said. “D’you remember how Nick an’ I used to stroke mother’s when her head ached, an’ you’d sit in her lap an’ coo at her. I guess my hand ain’t such a soft pudgy thing as it was—nor much cleaner, either. But you’ll have to make the best of it, Betty.”

He spoke Nick’s name levelly. But to Betty it was a match struck on tinder. He felt her body shiver and grow tense against him, and he interpreted it swiftly.

“No need for you to fret for him, Betty. He never knew what he had done. An’ as for what he did to himself . . . he chose to take his chance wi’ his God instead o’ wi’ man. There’s nothin’ for us to say over that.”

“No,” whispered Betty. “That’s what auntie always says—it’s not for us to judge.”

“That’s so,” said Jim, speaking slowly, and his thought went back to the woman whom love and pride bade him judge with sternness.

The silence of the bush closed round them again. Where a piece of bark hung loose from a blue-gum a big tarantula sat with each pinky-gray hairy leg distinct in the light. Bright eyes of possums and squirrels made pin-pricks of gleam on the dark, and all the rustlings and stirrings in leaves and mould and underscrub told of the thousand pulsing lives that God held in His hand as surely as He held Jim’s. The suggestion brought comfort to Betty. And Jim’s

clumsy hand passing over and over her forehead brought more comfort yet. There was a roughness somewhere in the palm, and it chafed the skin and caught separate hairs, dragging them. But Betty would not have had it otherwise, for the same tenderness and thought for the women of his house were there in Jim's manhood even as they had been in his boyhood.

Then sleep found Betty, to give her greater comfort than all else; and dawn was red in the sky when she felt the warmth of Jim's arm move from her shoulder, and heard his voice in her ear.

"Jim," she cried. "Jim! You've been holding me all the time. Oh, didn't you get any rest? Jim . . ."

Jim stood up stiffly. He was cramped and chilled, and his eyes burnt with want of that sleep which had been merciful to Betty.

"I'm all right," he said. "Scratch up a fire while I fill the billy. We got to make home before dark. There's no track now."

Betty rolled over, hiding her face an instant in Sinner's rough coat. How Jim had won through that motionless night she did not know, and he would never tell. But what his face told brought tears to Betty's eyes.

The horses were mountain-bred, and strong of sinew and heart. There was a day's work left in them, and Jim required it of them unto the last, so that the quivering after-pallor of gloaming hung still in the tree-tops when they swung down the side-track to the little stone house and halted at the gate.

Jim took the four reins in his hand.

"Go in to mother," he said. "I must see to the horses, for I'll have to go on to Buntree directly."

“Yes,” said Betty only.

Her heart was sick with dread. For, more than ever in her life, she was outside Jim’s life and thought, and what he meant to do before this trouble was ended she did not know. As the clatter of the hoofs passed her on the flags she stood a moment with hands pressed over her eyes. Courage and hope were very weak in her. Then Katherine’s arms came round her suddenly, and Katherine’s warm kisses brought the blood back with a rush.

“My brave lassie. Come in, darling. Roseen is out in the verandah, and she will never guess. Jim has taken the horses, hasn’t he? It is Jim, Betty?”

“Yes.” Betty clung to her. “Auntie—do you know——?”

“I know everything, Betty. Mr. Saltire came up and told me. Don’t talk yet. Come, Betty.”

In face, in little tricks of manner, Katherine was Jim made womanly. But the great-hearted tenderness that was Jim’s heritage also had been betrayed and made bitter in the man, and Katherine’s eyes, meeting Betty, knew it and answered in silence. For words, being for the reading of every eye and every understanding, never probe the deeps of the heart.

From the stable Jim caught the gleam of white among the vines of the verandah, and something in him gave him explanation unerringly. It was Roseen in one of Betty’s frocks. He fed and watered the horses with quick hands, scraped Miladi down roughly, shut the stable-door behind him, and came up to the verandah. Roseen had watched for his coming, and she fluttered to meet him, with white arms out and his name on her mouth. Too many men had fallen

under her power for her ever to doubt the strength of it. But she knew that between Jim of the Ranges and herself the battle to-night would be stern and very bitter. She had no intent to lose him; for Saltire had spoken of him with praise, and Jack West's star was set. But, because it was Jim, her confidence weakened as she came near.

"Dearest," she said. "Oh . . . my dearest. I have been so afraid."

Jim laid his hand on her arm. There was no grip, but in some way it compelled obedience.

"Come here," he said, and led her where the light from the window streamed clear. Roseen looked up at him, and the little quiver of her lips grew to a smile. Better than Jim she knew how very fair she was in the bar of light.

"Jim," she whispered.

"You banked too high," said Jim, and his voice was low and without feeling. "You banked on bein' able to make me as dishonourable as yourself. You've made a big mistake. But it's the last mistake you'll make about me. I'm goin' to be very certain o' that."

Roseen's eyes held his steadily. They were pure and clear as an evening sky. The delicate lines of face and body touched his senses as they had ever done. She linked both arms round his neck, leaning back from him.

"Jim," she said. "Listen to me first. Jim, I'm not afraid of you, because I love you."

The touch of her fingers was warm on his flesh. He stepped back, jerking her hands apart. For the chill of Nick's hand lay between himself and her until the end of eternity.

“Don’t you do that again,” he said quietly. “I have just a little more to say to you, an’ then there is nothin’ more to be said between us as long as we both live. You know what you’ve done wi’ my honour, but you don’t know the beginnin’ o’ what you’ve done wi’ your own. Hawkins has got hold o’ the story, an’ every newspaper in the State will have a hold of it before all’s done. I would have saved you that if I could. But it’s gone beyond me. You played the game for Jack West all through, an’ it was Nick told of you, not him. He wouldn’t ever ha’ told, for he loves you yet. I had that from him after he was caught. If there is anythin’ good in you stick to him when he comes out o’ this. An’ stick to him through it. That will help you both more than anythin’. He’s a man as loves an’ trusts in you yet. Don’t break him if there’s any mercy in you, Roseen.”

He spoke her name for the first time, and his voice shook on it. She heard, and she flung out her hands with a sudden, piteous cry.

“Jim. Oh, Jim ; you don’t understand. I did it for you. I thought you wanted to save Nick. Jim, don’t be cruel to me. Oh, Jim ; I did it only for you. Only for you, dearest.”

In Jim self-control was tested to breaking-pitch. Exhaustion of body and brain had weakened him ; scents of the bush and the garden, and the power of the night which waked the wild side of him, always played on his fibres and tuned them to the tone of Roseen’s voice. . . . He drew his breath hardly, looking down on her, and sweat came out on his skin.

“Jim,” murmured Roseen, and she put up her lips to his.

Then sudden blood stung his forehead to flame. He thrust her off, and she saw in his face that which no other woman would read there.

“Can’t you be anythin’ but false—even to yourself?” he said, and the bitter contempt in the words lashed her to fury. She had lost. For the first time in her life she had lost; and all the coarse anger of her little mean soul leaped out to rip and tear this Jim of the Ranges, who, of all men, had been too strong for her.

Jim stood with folded arms, rigid, unmoving, until the flame of her passion burnt out and washed away into sobs. Then she glanced at him, half-afraid.

“I . . . I’m so upset,” she whimpered. “I didn’t mean that you——”

“What you meant about me doesn’t trouble me,” he said quietly. “But you said some things about Betty jus’ now. I am not goin’ to have Betty’s name brought into this. You can tell what you like of me an’. I won’t say anythin’. But if ever in this world you dare to speak one word against Betty you an’ me’ll have a reckonin’ that you won’t forgit. Till that time comes you an’ me have spoke our last words together.”

He wheeled from her and walked into the house. At this moment he had no love, no tenderness for the waiting women within, even as he had none for the angry woman without.

Katherine, moving swiftly through the firelight, turned and straightened at his step. Then her face whitened. Jim was dusty and bowed, and the lines of his face were deep and hard. She had looked for this; but she had not looked for the smile in the eyes which chilled her and put her away from him. Jim

was not going to show the heart behind the eyes to any man or any woman, and to the mother this knowledge was a sharp pain.

“Well, mother,” he said lightly. “You’ve got Betty again, eh? She’s dead-tired, poor old girl. An’ I shan’t be sorry for a bed myself after I’ve seen Saltire.”

“You must go to him now, Jim?”

“I must. At once. He may want to send me straight on. I don’t know. Don’t wait up for me.”

He spoke slowly, feeling for each sentence with effort. Then before her quivering face his own softened.

“Don’t fret for him, mother,” he said. “He’s taken the best way out o’ it all. Prison would a-killed him. You know that well as I do.”

He went out heavily, with head sunk low. Katherine moved across the hearth to Betty, kneeling at the blaze, and turned the girl’s face up with a gentle hand.

“Don’t be afraid, Betty,” she said. “I know Jim—better than any one else. He has got to fight this out by himself, dear. But he will fight it out.”

Betty laid her bright head against Katherine’s skirts.

“She has broken his heart and his faith,” she said wearily.

Katherine laughed. But her eyes were anxious.

“Don’t you know my Jim better than that? She has given him a fall; but he will get up again. He is not even on his knees, yet. But he will get up again, lassie.”

“I don’t know,” said Betty.

She stared into the fire apathetically, watching the

sword-flash of red and yellow flame. Katherine leaned an arm on the mantel, looking down on her. Betty was dear to her as her boys, and the coming together of Betty and Jim would have been her heaven on earth. For two minutes her thoughts ran swiftly as a tatting-shuttle, back and forth, catching each thread.

Then she said :

“ Betty, it is too cold for Roseen to be out. Go and bring her in, dear.”

“ I can’t.” Betty sprang to her feet with sudden glow and life in body and face. “ Auntie, don’t ask me——”

“ I do ask you, childie. Never mind why. And be kind to her. I trust you for that, my Betty.”

For a moment Betty stood, rebellion and anger hot in her face. Then she swung away swiftly, going down the kitchen with the free, light step, and the well-held young head that lit Katherine’s pride in her again.

“ She would eat her heart out to know,” she said. “ And Roseen will tell her. I can wait till Jim tells me.”

Betty thrust the door wide, and went out to the night of chill air and brilliant stars and sharp, pungent scents. In the big cane-chair under the wisteria, Roseen was crumpled into a little, silent heap. Betty stood a moment. Her cropped head and the man-part she had played seemed to have waked man-pity for the frailer, more irresponsible nature of women.

“ Roseen,” she said.

Roseen gave neither answer nor movement. Betty’s heart-beat quickened. What had Jim said or done to her ? For a man can be merciless, and, if Roseen

truly cared . . . she stooped over the little white figure, sliding an arm round the narrow shoulders.

“Come in, dear,” she said gently. “It’s too cold for you.”

In the big chair Roseen was hating Jim and pitying herself consumedly. But at Betty’s touch the pity overflowed in a river of tears.

“Betty, Betty,” she sobbed. “He’s given me up. He says he’ll never speak to me again. Oh, he is heartless . . . heartless. And he never kissed me once. Did you think Jim could be so nasty? Oh, did you?”

“I think he believes that he had no choice but to give you up,” said Betty, steadying her voice. “You can’t love him, Roseen.”

“Love him! Love him! Me? I’d sooner go to prison than marry him now.” Roseen sat up, pushing her hair off her flushed face. “He is the most bad-tempered, pig-headed man I ever met. And I told him so. He is only thinking of himself. I gave him the chance to let Nick go, and I asked him to stay *because* I asked him. But not he! He wanted his stripe, and he went after it, and I suppose he’ll get it. That’s all he was thinking about; and if it means more to him than I do it’s just as well for me that I found it out in time, and so I told him.”

Her innate vulgarity was made clear in her satisfied, jerky little voice. Betty stood up slowly, and her deep eyes darkened. This woman had the power to put Jim’s heart on the wheel and to rack it into added agony.

“You told him that?” she said, very low.

“Yes, I did. And he didn’t like it. He’s always

sulky when he doesn't like a thing. But it'll do him good to hear the truth for once. He thinks too much of himself."

Betty moved back from her. Jim's face as she had seen it since first the bolt fell was strongly graven before the eyes of her mind.

"I hope you will never really understand what you have said," she answered. "I think you will never forgive yourself if you do. Now you had better come in. It's getting cold."

Roseen stood up with a flounce of her skirts.

"I always understand what I say, and you are very disagreeable——"

Then she broke into a sudden passion of weeping.

"Oh, Betty, how can you be so cruel! He's j-j-jilted me. And I had just decided how I was going to have my wedding-dress made. But he doesn't care! If I made a dress out of a bed-tick he wouldn't care. He only thinks of himself. Oh, Betty . . . I have no one to comfort me . . . and I wish I was dead! It would be much easier to be dead than to be jilted."

She flung herself on Betty, holding to her with sobbing strength. And Betty stood unmoving, with lips set and eyes that stared before her without sight. Shame was scorching her, shame for Roseen, shame for her own sex which could give this to a man when he came to her in his righteous anger and his sorrow. Until this hour she had never touched more than Roseen's hand. And now the soft warmth against her neck and shoulder revolted her. So had Roseen come to Jim many times with her baby griefs and her sweet pleadings. And Jim—Jim had given in answer

more than Betty knew. She lifted Roseen away from her.

“I don’t want to be unkind,” she said. “But you are not the only one who is unhappy just now. Come in. It’s too cold here.”

“Well, I’m sure I hope Jim is unhappy,” said Roseen, dabbing her eyes. “He deserves to be. He says I can say what I like about him over this and he won’t contradict it. I mean to. I suppose I’ll have to go down to Melbourne and be examined, and all the rest of it, and I just will say what I like. Jim owes me that much after jilting me. And poor Jack—I do think it’s hard on Jack, when all this has just happened because Jim doesn’t love me as much as he pretended to.”

A strange light came into Betty’s eyes. At that moment all that was best in her reached out toward the best in Jim, and she understood him as she never had done before. She looked down on Roseen through dropped lashes, and her voice had ice in it.

“All this has happened because you are not what you pretended to be,” she said. “But only an honourable woman would be troubled by knowing that. You will not.”

“You little cat,” cried Roseen shrilly. “You cat! You love him yourself. I knew you did. I told him so. I——”

A moment Betty stared at her with wide eyes and parted lips. Then she turned, ran round the house to her window, leaped the low sill, and fell on her bed. All the blood of her body burnt in her face and throat.

“What shall I do?” she said. “What shall I do? What shall I do?”

The scent of mignonette came with its strange, sweet bitterness from the garden, brought by a straying breeze. Betty shuddered, hiding her eyes in the pillow. The coming of love had brought bitter for her only. No sweet; no sweet through all her days and nights for all her life.

In the kitchen Katherine's voice sounded in talk with Roseen. Out in the night a boobook owl called, and from the stable came once the clatter of Myall's hoofs where he pulled back in sudden alarm at a peering possum. But on her bed Betty lay with hidden face, and hands shut tightly.

"If he believes it?" she said. "What shall I do when I see him again if he believes it?"

CHAPTER XVI

“ AS THE BIRD TRIMS HER TO THE GALE ”

SALTIRE'S little room at Buntree was bright and hot with lamplight, and with a log fire, and with the smell of whiskey and tobacco-smoke. Five minutes since Jim had come in, bringing a rush of cold air that hung yet in the corners ; and Saltire spread his hands to the blaze, speaking with teeth shut on his pipe-stem and little eyes eager and red as the flame.

“ Soutar can wait,” he said. “ And your evidence can wait. But this—well, on my soul, Jim, I don't see anything else for it. Except that you're not fit to take the saddle again, you know.”

Jim crushed a couple of telegrams up in his hand. They were from Hawkins away out in a little Benambra township, and they gave in brief detail that which Saltire had been crazy to know. But they gave more, and on this quite possibly waited a life. Jim knew, because Saltire had told him so ; but his brain was numb yet. He spoke slowly :

“ I can go,” he said. “ You think he might be at the Cave, then ? ”

Saltire flashed a keen glance at the set face and the still eyes. The man was done, physically and mentally done. And yet he must give what was still left, and at once.

“ You can see it for yourself,” he said. “ Eleven

horses were tracked up to Budgee, and eleven men were wanted. But only ten were caught there. The eleventh horse had been used to carry provisions. Therefore, one man was left somewhere to shift for himself. And that man was the Kid. He is no bushman. He would not be likely to have much tucker. I think there is no time to be lost, Jim."

"No time to be lost," echoed Jim vaguely. "No . . . the Kid. . . ."

Saltire crossed to the cupboard, poured a stiff nip, and thrust it into Jim's hand.

"Get outside that and we'll talk," he said. "Now, Jim, I don't know another man who could find the trail to Wapshott's Cave on a night like this. But I'm blest if I know if you're the man who can do it just now."

For a space the fiery drink put Jim into dreamland. Nerves and muscles were shouting for rest, and he swayed on his feet and staggered. Saltire caught him, cursing the luck which had brought the wires over-late on a winter's evening.

"For there's just a chance," he said. "He's bound to be there, for the horses were tracked from there. Jim . . . oh, damn it all! I've put the stopper on things now, I'm afraid."

Out of the soft drowsiness of whispering leaves and hot sunshine and peace, Jim's brain came back with a rush to Saltire's voice, and to the little, low room, and to the memory of the Kid's blue eyes as he had last seen them. He straightened, feeling the blood leap along his veins and run in a molten fire through his heat. Grief, and pain, and wrath were wiped out. He was drunk, mad drunk, and the strength of ten men was on him.

“Give me another nip,” he said. “One more, an’ I’ll go slap through hell but I’ll get him.”

He snatched the glass, drained it, and wheeled, with all the vivid over-mastering sense of power back in him.

“I’m goin’,” he cried. “I’m goin’ now. An’ I’ll bring him back. By ——! I’ll bring him back.”

He went through the house like a whirlwind, gathering food and drink and a blanket. He raped the best horse from Carleton’s stables, flung on any gear at all, and raced up the street before Saltire had put necessary understanding into the bewildered Carleton. Then Carleton spat on the flags, and grunted.

“He may break the colt’s wind or his neck so long as he don’t break his own,” he said. “But it’s a perilous bad track up there even in daylight, an’ Jim ain’t ridin’ pretty ter-night. You’ve made him drunk as a bullocky, sir.”

“I had to,” said Saltire.

And then he went back to decide if he had done wisely, and, staring out on the blank black night, he shuddered. Could any man, even Jim of the Ranges, manage a young colt in those ranges to-night? And supposing that man were drunken. . . .

“But I had to,” said Saltire again. “He was done, or the brandy would never have got such a hold. And, being done, he couldn’t have gone without it. But —shouldn’t I have chanced the Kid? I couldn’t, though. Hanged if I could.”

But all which troubled Saltire meant nothing at all to Jim. The wild desire for action caught him. The keen wind nipped his flesh and stung his blood to swifter heat. He dropped low in the saddle, driving

the willing colt forward by the knee-grip, by the lift of the reins, by cunning talk such as a horse knows well. And the black night rushed by with long strides, and the trees reeled back to right and to left. Life or death ruled in Wapshott's Cave, and Jim was going to find out what the Kid had to do with them. Under the bridge the river was calling out the Kid's name. The wash swept it among the rocks, and the echo held it as the colt flung the boarding behind. On the levels the hoof-beat took up the call, until, back in the ranges, the Kid surely must hear and hold Death off, waiting Jim's coming. The bleached white of rung trees were like skeletons running, and the thick shadows between were their calling graves. The track lifted, and the crackle of the young honeysuckles shouted the one word sharply as the colt broke them across his chest, topping the slope as a driven boat tops a wave.

The stars wrote the name over the sky, with each point of light stabbing it into Jim's heart. Collected thought was not in him. Bone, sinew, and flesh ached consumedly, and Saltire's order only sat up in his brain and controlled him. He must get to the Kid. He must save the Kid. Why, when, or how did not matter. He must go . . . go, whilst the colt's labouring breath held and his own stiffened limbs gripped the leather.

A rock-face, bleared with white lichen, slapped up out of the night; Jim slewed to the left; heard the rattle of loose stones roar down to an unseen river as the colt's feet slipped, wrenched him back by wrist-force to the track again, and raced on. An owl was calling somewhere, and the nasty bark of a fox sounded

close in the scrub. The brush and crashing of bracken-stems came round the colt's hocks, and Jim raised his head.

“ I'm gittin' near,” he said, and his voice sounded harsh and forced. “ I'm gittin' near. We're over the Long Lookout . . . an' there's the river callin' at Wapshott's Crossin'.”

The colt tucked his hind-feet under him and shot down the naked stony slope. His lather smudged Jim's face and breast, his great shoulders rocked, and there was blood in his nostrils. He took the water like a launched ship, blew out his contempt of its hurry, and beat across with mighty strokes. Jim clung weakly round his neck as he landed, pulled him to the right with numbed hands, and set his head to the rise again. Already the power and the heat of the drink were dying, leaving a deadly cold behind. Over a jagged ridge to the nor'ward the moon was lifting, clear and round and harshly bright. The open spaces were peppered with shadows—shadows of crouching dogs, of dead men, of women who rocked children where the gum-branches swayed. There was no noise but the throb of the hoofs, no life but the creeping of the shadows. A chilly hand seemed to feel in Jim's body for his heart and to hold it.

“ I never saw it this still before,” he said stupidly. “ An' I never saw so many dead things . . . there's a shot bullock kickin'. . . .”

That shadow passed behind with the rest ; the bush thickened and blackened ; for the first time the knowledge of utter loneliness, of loneliness such as makes a man afraid, flung its arms round Jim and grinned at him.

The shadows had so many faces. This one lifted a lip, showing a fanged tooth . . . there was a ragged moustache dropping over the mouth . . . a mouth like Soutar's . . . Jim jerked the colt back on its haunches, and a voice that he did not know for his own said :

"We've done it. Now . . . we got to stand up . . . an' find the Kid . . . where the blazes are you goin' to ?"

He picked himself out of the box-scrub, bisected a clump of stunted gums, and staggered to the cave-mouth. Then the snarl of a bullet whipped by his ear, and he heard a wattle-sapling sob at its touch. Sudden fury swirled into his brain. Reason, sense, and control were gone. He cast an oath at the grinning dark mouth, ducked his head behind his arm, and sprang in. Then the hidden revolver spoke again, and Jim went down on his face among the gum-leaves of a century, and lay there.

And then the Kid crept out of a split in the rocks, felt in the silent man's pocket for a match, struck it, and turned the man over. A moment he crouched, staring into the drawn face. He put out a hand to touch it, and drew back. Suddenly he sucked in his lips.

"P'raps he's brought some tucker," said his brain, and he thrust greedy hands into Jim's tunic.

"Outside," said the brain again, without direct volition from the Kid. He got to his hands and knees unsteadily, crawled out, heard the colt shaking its sweated sides in the dark, and pounced on the swag before the saddle with an animal snarl of hunger. He shook it open, setting his teeth in the meat, and a

native cat landed at his elbow, with great yellow eyes flaring. The Kid struck her across the nose with his fist, gathered up flask and food, and turned back to the cave. He was no more than an animal guarding his kill, and he crawled over Jim's legs with as little heed as an animal might have done.

The moon climbed higher, flinging long bars of light through the cave. The flask shot a gleam that caught the Kid's notice. He snatched at it. Then his eyes led down the ladder of light to Jim. Food, the sense of human presence, the well-known face, struck away the crazed horror that the lonely days had brought and gave the Kid his senses again. He was weak in body and brain and heart ; but he was sane, and he knew it, even as a blind man knows when he comes into the sunlight. The old warmth of his love for Jim surged back. He lifted himself, stumbling across the cave.

“ Jim,” he sobbed. “ J-Jim, old man——”

Then he fell beside the silent body and cried until healing sleep took him.

It was Jim who first roused under the hot hands of the sun. The bullet-wound in his thigh burnt like quick-rubbed wire, and his head sang a thousand tunes at once. He turned slightly, and the movement brought the hot blood soaking again through his stiffened clothing.

“ T-that won't do,” he muttered. “ I must get . . . get somethin' round it. . . . Kid ! ”

Three times he called, and felt that strength was sliding from him. He shut his eyes again, knowing that he did not care. The past was vague ; but dimly he remembered that it had been dark, and rough, and

tense with pain and sorrow. Now the blackness and the strife were gone, and the sun-heat and the smell of the gum-leaves closed about him. Somewhere a yellow robin was singing . . . singing a gladder song than any earth-man may understand. Dimly, contentedly, Jim knew that he understood. The unleashed, reckless joy swept him up with it, up through the branching gums and the pointed sassafras and the murmuring belars, up . . . and then the Kid's hands caught him, and dragged him back to earth and to pain, and the Kid's voice battered his ears with many words, and a little fire-thread that tasted of brandy ran down his throat, and the world began again.

For a space he was not grateful. The Kid was nothing but a clawing toothache as he pulled and strapped and knotted strips of his shirt round the wound, and poured brandy between the shut teeth, and tortured Jim again and yet again out of the numb peace that rocked soft arms for him.

The blue stern eyes and the ruffled hair and the face-outline that had once been the Kid's hovered far off to Jim's sight. They came nearer, and presently he spoke to them.

"Somebody's been handin' out trouble to me," he said. "Was it Soutar?"

"No," said the Kid, dropping on one knee. "I did it. I tried to kill you, Jim."

"You?" Jim looked him over in slow wonder. "You? Why?"

Hot blood flushed the Kid's face. His eyes were hard as his lips and his voice. His boyish, eager stutter was gone, and his boyhood was gone with it.

"You came up here to take me," he said. "And

I'm not going to be taken. I will never be taken . . . by you or any one else."

"Nick said that," Jim spoke drowsily. "Nick said it, and he's dead."

"Dead!" The Kid's skin blanched suddenly. He laid a hand on Jim's leg as though to feel living flesh somewhere. "Not Nick! Not old Nick!"

"He's dead," said Jim again. "He jumped his mare over Lefroy's Cliff. He said he wouldn't be taken."

"Dead!" breathed the Kid. He opened his fingers to the sunlight, moving them, and watching the red blood coursing between the bones. He tried to force his brain to the understanding that all such was past with Nick. Then he looked again on Jim. Jim was white as a dead man, his eyes and cheeks were sunken, his chest scarcely moved with his breath. Sudden fear grasped the Kid.

"Jim," he cried. "I must get some one for you. I—I'll go down to Buntree. I——"

Jim smiled, with the old humour back in his eyes.

"That's your sort," he said. "But you're not goin' to leave me, Kid. Saltire will be sending fellows up some time to-day, an' you're goin' to stay an' face it out wi' me."

"I'm not," said the Kid with stiff lips.

"What'll you bet?" Jim's smile was tender as Katherine's. "For a man o' your age you know mighty little o' yourself, Kid."

The Kid stared at the veined rock where the lichen shadows swayed, and his words came as though pulled out by pincers.

"I'll stay till some one comes. Then I'll shoot

myself—if I can. I've tried lots of times. But I hadn't the nerve."

There was a little silence. The movements of the colt biting at the low scrub outside broke it. Then :

"So I'm to have your death on my conscience, too?" asked Jim.

The Kid glanced at him sharply. There were beads of sweat on Jim's forehead and deep-sunken lines round his mouth. It was the face of a man controlling mental agony by great force of will, and it upset the Kid.

"What about me?" he said roughly. "I'm responsible for giving you Nick's name . . . and Jack West's."

"You are not. As a matter of fact you did no harm. I got the whole thing from Cleghorn. He turned King's Evidence."

"What?" The Kid slewed round, with a blaze in his eyes and a stammer on his mouth. "Is that true? Is t-t-that true? By ——! if it's not. . . ."

"It's true," said Jim. He spoke slowly, for the earth and the walls of rock were sliding away from him again. "There's nothin' on your shoulders but what'll affect yourself. An' I believe you're man enough to stand up to that."

The Kid's face twitched. His eyes brimmed. Something of his boyhood came back, and he dropped his head in his hands, sobbing as a child sobs, with healing in every breath. Jim watched in a dull envy and weariness. Then the sunlight and all else slipped out of sight, and he went back into dreamland with a sigh of content, and stayed there.

The cave was darker when he roused again to the crackle of fire and the rustle of gum-leaves under

moving feet. At the hinder end of the cave a billy swung on forked sticks, and red and blue flame leapt round it, painting the toffee-brown walls, and the litter of rubbish on the floor, and the Kid's long, angular body as he moved back and forth. He stooped his head to turn the meat lying on a flake of rock in the embers, and Jim saw his face with its guard off. And he read it, as a man may read with clear inner vision when the gross strength of the body does not overpower the brain. The Kid had come through fiercer flames than those tearing the heart out of the gum-logs. He had faced his Gethsemane in bitter solitude, and in hunger, and in body and spirit weakness. And, by reason of it, he had received the accolade of manhood—a manhood that he would not disgrace.

Jim knew. Lying moveless, with his own heart-sorrow numb, he knew that the fresh wind of the hill-top was even now blowing through the Kid's hair. But he did not know that he who himself had fallen was the power which had drawn the Kid out of the bog that held his feet.

The Kid turned, came quickly across, and stooped close.

“There'll be some tea in a minute,” he said anxiously.

“Or would y-you have another nip, Jim? And I've got some mutton grilling——”

“Why didn't you scoff the lot?” murmured Jim.

“I brought it for you.”

The Kid's drawn cheeks flushed. His belt was pinched in to its last hole, and he alone knew what it had cost him to keep his teeth out of that spitting meat.

“There's p-plenty for t-two,” he said. “If you——”

But at Jim's refusal he bolted the whole, and crouched, shame-faced, and licking his lips like a starved dog.

"I n-never guessed what a brute a man can be when he's hungry," he said. "I t-tried to shoot and snare things. B-but I couldn't hit anything——"

"You hit me," suggested Jim with a grin. "You landed me good an' fair, Kid. I reckon I'm anchored here till Saltire sends some one along."

"I didn't hit straight," said the Kid in his throat. "I meant to kill you. I saw you in the moonlight, and I meant to kill you."

Jim groped with a feeble hand.

"Put it there, old man," he whispered.

And the Kid gripped with long, nervous fingers, and stared at the wall with wet eyes.

It was later, when dark blackened the mouth of the cave, that Jim understood that Saltire would send no help that night. The utter tiredness which possesses the body, denying it rest, was on him ; but the blood-letting had weakened him mercilessly. By careful engineering the Kid dragged him on to a bed of sassafras-tips and piled leaves, propped his head with a pillow of the same material, and tucked the blue blanket over the whole. Then he made the fire until the smoke roared out sideways in the draught, and the many-coloured flames polished the rock, and sat beside it, with elbows on knees and his chin in the heel of his fists.

Jim watched him in silence at first. Then, slowly and painfully, he drew from the Kid's reluctant tongue some understanding of the evil that had been warping the boy. But the Kid guarded eyes and words loyally, and, whilst Jim lived, he never learnt the full of Nick's share in the whole.

"I'm going to stand it out all right now," said the

Kid, snapping dried leaves and tossing them on the fire. “ It was when I thought I’d peached on the other chaps that I believed I’d go mad. That was too awful, you know, Jim.”

“ Yes,” said Jim only, and the Kid turned on him swiftly.

“ Y-you had to do it,” he cried. “ By ——, Jim, I—I do think Saltire is a brute. It was your duty, of course. But I d-don’t know how you did it, Jim.”

“ I’ve lived through that,” said Jim, and his lips twisted with a faint smile. “ Every one knows now that I had to do it. But there are other things. . . . I’ve done harm in more ways than one, Kid.”

And there, in the cave-dimness, with the great tarantulas in the crevices sinking and raising their bodies to the heat by their many hairy legs, and the flapping of bats sounding like clothes drying on a line far up in the blackness, Jim told the Kid in brief sentences some part of Roseen’s share in this. It was expiation ; and in truth he believed it to be due to the Kid, because, the Kid having once set him up for an idol, must learn that his idol had clay feet.

The Kid listened, unmoving, with his head between his hands and his eyes on the fire. He read the emptiness of Jim’s heart in his tone, in his words, and his own generous young heart quickened and heated in sympathy. His speech, when it came, was curt as Jim’s ; but in some way the two men understood fully, and respected each other the more. Then Jim lay silent. Pain of body and mind was awake again, and the softening hour was not yet.

The Kid kicked the fire, cleared his throat awkwardly, then blurted his words with a rush.

" You l-look the dead ring of your mother just now, Jim. Y-you make me think of something she told me once. I—I hadn't got any storms of time to run up against then, but I have thought of it often to-night. It's E-Emerson, I think. He says :

' As the bird t-trims her to the gale,
I trim myself to the s-storms of time.'

I—I reckon it's about up to us to start on some trimming, isn't it, Jim ? "

Jim gave no answer. But his mother's face shone on the dark for him, blotting out Roseen's for the first time. It was God's own truth that had been put on the Kid's lips. No man is meant to buffet the gale until he falls exhausted and useless before his earth-work is done. Jim had buffeted the gale ever since the Kid's angry words had told him of Nick's wrong-doing. His belief in the Eternal Right, in God's good-fellowship with man, in the never-failing glory and delights of earth, had gone down, trampled under his feet, when the first test came to him. He had made no use of his powers wherewith to trim himself to the heaven-sent gale. He had looked for blackness in the future only, and he had wanted only death for himself. Through those nights in the bush it was Betty who had saved him from the double death—Betty, and not he himself in the strength of his manhood. He lay still, meeting this with the innate courage that was yet left out of the wreck ; and the Kid, waiting long for an answer, toppled over and snored by the dying fire.

It was broad daylight when the Kid woke to the sound of voices and the jangling of steel. He rolled on his side in drowsy comfort. Jim was there. It

was all right if Jim was there. Then he heard Jim speaking, low and painfully.

“ Let him sleep it out long as you can, sir. He’s dead-beat, poor young beggar, an’ he’s looked after me like a good ’un.”

“ Was it him perforated that there hole inter yer ? ” demanded a voice that the Kid knew for Hack’s. “ Glory, Jim ; you’re in a nice mess, you are. Bullet there yet, eh ? ”

“ Think so. Hold on a minute, Hartmann. Ah ! ”

It was a sharp cry, bitten off between shut teeth. But it brought the Kid to his feet, stumbling and rubbing his eyes. The cave was full of men—Saltire, stooping over Jim with his red face redder and his stertorous breath shorter ; Hack on his knees, handling Jim’s bandages skilfully ; two constables whom the Kid did not know, and Hartmann.

It was Hartmann who whipped round as the Kid stood up, and he dropped his hand to his pocket. The Kid went white, half-turned, and caught Jim’s eyes with the look in them that Katherine’s wore sometimes. He braced himself, drew a hard breath, and thrust his wrists out.

“ I’m ready,” he said quietly, and took the kiss of cold iron on his skin without flinching.

CHAPTER XVII

“ SHE’S AFRAID OF THE DARK ”

SUMMER was over the earth again, and over Buntree, and golden-bright over the little stone house down the track. Much water had run under bridges since summer looked there last ; and Betty, shelling peas on the front door-step, let her fingers drop idly and leaned her head against the upright whilst thought had its will with her.

Up to her very feet the pigeons came, cooing and strutting ; in the high Murray-pines and the gum-trees parrots flashed, and wattle-birds quarrelled, and a crow shrieked once and again. Light and life and virility were in the air, and Betty’s strong young senses opened to all that they told her as a flower opens to the day. A little coon-song of Jim’s came to her lips heedlessly. Then the tears brimmed her eyes. And then she laughed and dashed them away, and fell to splitting the soft pods again.

Within, Katherine moved with her sure, gentle step, and for a moment Betty’s dark brows knotted. The Kid was coming back to-day, and Jim had gone down to Buntree to meet him. Shame and dishonour and many things more had beaten on the Kid’s curly head since last Betty saw him, and his memory was mixed up with Nick’s. On Nick’s grave the grass would be blowing long and lush where the wind swept over Gurugal Hill, and Betty looked down through the

clematis-arches and the blossoming orange-trees to the playroom with blinded eyes.

“But Jim can talk of him now,” she said. “If—if I only knew how he felt about Roseen.”

Two months since Roseen had married the Melbourne lawyer who defended Jack West. Jack West got three years, and the lawyer’s reward was Roseen. With laughter dimpling her mouth again Betty wondered which man had the heavier sentence. Then she remembered the nonsense Jim and Hack had talked on the night which had brought the news, and, as always, her mind handled that subject nervously and with wistfulness and with an anger that flung it aside only to go back to it the very next day.

For Jim filled much of Betty’s life now. Promotion had come to him, and some honour, and the Buntree post with a young sub under him. And many nights found him up at the old house, with the old threads of life to handle again, and the old “odd jobs” to do in his spare hours as once he had done them so long ago. Into the dead, gray level of Betty’s life he had come with the ring of his feet and the cheer of his voice; come to bring her in touch with the big world by his yarns and his wise, slow sayings, and his never-tiring, patient care of herself and of Katherine; come as son, as brother, as friend, as—Betty’s face burnt to her ears with only the pigeons to watch her. For the woman in her had read a new note into Jim’s voice of late, a new look in his eyes, an added eagerness to take the chopping of wood and the carrying of water from her.

She dropped the pods again with the sweetness of that knowledge surging over her to be met by the

cold blast of doubt. And then the swing of hoofs came down the cutting; Jim's voice and the Kid's sounded in the backyard, and she heard Katherine run down the kitchen with the lightness of a girl. Betty's lips curved, and her eyes grew tender.

"Dear auntie," she said. "I won't go yet. She'll take the sting out of it for him."

Jim's step trod up the passage, and he came out on the porch beside her. Betty glanced up, met the gravity of his eyes, and glanced away again.

"You've brought him, then," she said.

"Yes." Jim smoked slowly, settling his back against the boarding. "Yes. I had been wonderin' whether it was best to let him come back wi' the prison crop on him, an' that shamed look in his eyes. But the mother will do him more good than anythin' else. Poor young beggar; he's had a hard row to hoe, Betty. A hard row to hoe."

"He is not the only one," said Betty softly. Then she looked up wickedly. "You were the one who looked on, I suppose," she said. "Those two are just like lovers when they meet. Didn't you feel out of it?"

"Yes," said Jim composedly. "That's why I came to you."

He glanced down at her, seeing her cheeks fly the flag that his words could bring so swiftly. But she did not speak, and Jim had learnt the set of her lips over-well to expect it. His direct comprehensive look noted her prim attitude, with the tin pan on her knees and her print skirt pulled down to her shoe-tips. Her bent head made a glory of bobbing light that shamed the gully steeped in golden haze beyond the garden

fence, and her firm, quick fingers fumbled a little with the dropping pods.

He grinned slowly, showing white teeth shut on his pipe, and a glimmer of mischief ran into his eyes. Half underbreath he began to sing a little song belonging to the Melbourne days :

“‘Come back again, San Toy O,
Ever remain a boy O. . . .’”

“Don’t,” cried Betty, and banged the pan down on the step. “How dare you !”

She was a blaze of anger, and the crisp defiant hair put the crown on it. Jim laughed, dropping on one knee to gather up the spilt pods.

“What’s wrong ?” he asked innocently. “I say, Betty, the pigeons are gettin’ all your peas.”

“I don’t care ! Pick them up, then. It’s your fault. You know I—I hate to be reminded of that.”

“Thanks,” said Jim gratefully. “That’s the first time you’ve ever allowed that I know anythin’ about you, Betty. I’m gittin’ on.”

“You’re not. You don’t know . . . oh, you stupid ! Don’t look at me like that !”

“How do you want me to look at you ?” demanded Jim, with the corners of his mouth twitching.

Betty seized on her dignity again.

“It makes no difference to me how you look at me. Give me the pan.”

“Thanks.” Jim pushed off his hat and sat back on his foot. “Then I’ll look at you this way.”

Betty stood the torture for one half-minute. And after that she flung the empty pods in his face.

“You can finish the rest,” she said. “I’m going in.”

“No.” Jim caught her hand. “You’re not wanted

in there, an' I do want you out here. I came across an old copy-book o' yours in the playroom yesterday, an' it had got a bit out o' Scott written in it. Do you remember the 'Lady o' the Lake' wi' her

'Foot more light an' step more true'

than any other? Do you know who that minded me of, Betty?"

"Me," said Betty, thrusting out her heavily-shod feet. "Me, of course. Who else?"

"Not you," said Jim steadily. "It made me think of Roseen."

He felt her start, and the hand in his tried to pull free. It was the first time that Roseen's name had been spoken between them since that bitter night when Nick died.

"It made me think o' Roseen," said Jim again. "I been meanin' to speak to you o' her before now, Betty. I want to tell you that it didn't hurt me to hear o' her gettin' married. She gave me all the hurtin' one man could stand long ago. But she ended it, Betty. She can't hurt me now. I was mad for her once. I was like the fellow Gordon tells about who kissed the woman he loved, an'

'I said, "There is no deeper bliss for them in Heaven that dwell";

'I lost her, an' I said, "There is no fiercer pang in Hell."'

Roseen made me feel both o' those for her. But that's gone. It's gone for ever, an' I know there's all the ripenin' of my life to come yet. An' it is goin' to be better than what has been. I've learnt enough to know that. She hurt me sore, Betty, but that wound's healed up. Once a man knows contempt for a woman she hasn't the power to make him feel any more."

Betty stood unmoving. Her face was turned away. But the danger-signal hung scarlet in her cheeks and her pulses were leaping. Jim dropped her hand and stood back.

“That’s all just now,” he said. “I hear mother an’ the Kid comin’. I wanted you to know this, Betty.”

Betty gave no answer at all. She picked up her pan and fled. And Jim went to meet the two, unnoting the Kid’s quivering lips and Katherine’s wet, smiling eyes. For he had drawn his first arrow on Betty, and he knew that the shaft had struck home.

Through the sharp fever following his wound, through the weary convalescence, and the grief that he tried to hide, and the irritability that he tried to fight, Betty had grown into his life unknowingly. And then Hack jerked his heart and brain awake suddenly, on a night when he came down to the Buntree Police Station and flushed Jim in his private room, where he sat with his feet on the mantel and his head in a veil of smoke.

“I been along to your house agin,” said Hack, opening the ball with promptness. “An’ I been arstin’ Betty agin would she marry me. An’ she says she won’t. Every time she says she won’t, Jim, an’ it fair gits me down.”

He laid his back to the shelf and stared at Jim. The round apple-face was despondent, and energy had gone out of him. And Jim stared back. Blankly, and yet seeing something new with the vivid distinctness of whitewash suddenly splashed on a wall.

“I don’t know as there’s any one else,” went on Hack. “An’ I won’t turn it up till I hears there is some one else. Then I reckon it’ll be about time fer

me ter bunk. I ain't cur enough ter kip on yappin' onst I am fed up. But . . . I thought as per'aps you might say a word fer me, Jim, ole man."

Jim put his feet down, sat up, and knocked the ashes out of his pipe. He did it slowly, with the unconscious, easy grace that Hack envied, and the little man swallowed a groan.

"Ef I'd got your outside put on ter my love fer her, Jim," he remarked, "I reckon I might have a look in. But, ef you was runnin' agin me, blowed ef I'd hev a Buckley's chanst. No, dinged ef I would."

"I'm not runnin' yet." Jim paid down his words deliberately. "But I'm goin' in. I give you fair warnin', Hack. You've been makin' the pace these two years an' more. Now I'm comin' up against you in the straight, an' I'm goin' for a finish."

Hack spun on him with a curt oath. His hands were shut, and his round eyes popped in his head. Jim stood up, facing him. But for a space neither man spoke. It was the great test of the mateship that had held unbroken through many years, and it tightened their muscles and brought the sweat to their foreheads. Be a woman good or evil, she is answerable for more of both in men than she knows.

Then Hack's face changed.

"Shake, mate," he said. And over Jim's grip he added: "If she goes ter the best man, I'm done. But give me a little time ter git my bearins an' my second wind afore yer comes up alongside."

"If she goes to the best man that's not me," said Jim. "But I can't wish you luck, Hack. I'll stand off for a month, an' you can take all the innin's you can git. After that it's me to play."

The month had been up five full days when the Kid came home. But Hack and Betty had kept still tongues, and Jim played his first move unknowing of the issue until Hack rode into Buntree that night and told him the end of the story.

"It's no good," he said briefly. "My chances were nix all along, Jim, an' I reckon I knowed it. I'm not tryin' again, now. A feller sees when he's beat, or, if he don't, he ought ter."

"And did she tell you anythin' more?"

There was a little silence. Jim trod the uneven footpath at Hack's side with ears sharpened for the answer. The light from Carleton's bar blinked at him through the warm haze of evening, and he turned his eyes from it to the steady glow of a star over the ranges. The warm, alluring bar-lamp was Roseen. But the star was Betty in her pure, cold maidenhood.

"She didn't tell me," said Hack slowly. "But I guess there is another chap, an' I'll bet the joker it's you. Wade in an' fix it, Jim. Since I can't have her I'm glad it's you."

"Thanks, old man." Jim's voice was husky. "On my soul I haven't pushed it. I never let her know till to-day that I wasn't whippin' the cat for Roseen still."

"I know. That's all right." Then, casually: "I reckon I'll light out o' here for a while. Might run over to New Zealand, per'aps. Allers plenty o' work layin' round there."

"Take the Kid," said Jim. "He'll find Buntree a bit tough after what he's been through. Take him along an' help him to a fresh start."

"He can come ef he likes," said Hack with indiffer-

ence. But Jim knew that the Kid's future was safe, and he carried that thought with him up Buntree Hill when Hack had gone and the summer night lay waiting for him alone.

Nature has a trick of putting herself into the soul that is fit to receive her. She takes toll for it: the man who lives near her may neither do nor think evil without a burning shame; but she gives him in recompense his birthright of heaven on earth. From Nature's hills and long levels and downs the man who serves her sees into heaven twice daily—when the clouds of glory split apart at day's birth, and when they come in God-sent gold and purple to draw her back through the eternal gates again. Jim had lived near Nature all his days, and he knew where to go in his joy and in his sorrow. Now he flung himself down on the hill-top and let joy sweep over him as the wind swept over the grass.

"I wouldn't go through this last month again," he said. "Not for anythin' on earth. I didn't know, an' I don't know now. But I've got a clear track, an' I can make her love me. Good Lord! To think I didn't know it till Hack jolted some sense into me!"

He lay still, watching the wind running in the grass and blowing it into billows of brown and green and vivid silver as the heads swayed this way and that. The standing grass was like a forest about him, and, through it, he saw dimly the blue strength of distant hills against the pallid sky. So a forest of despair had once hedged him round when the blue hills of hope were very far away. He laughed softly to himself.

"I've come out o' that," he said. "Betty, Betty,

old girl, you have brought me out. But I want you to do more than that, Betty, an’ I know that you won’t give in easy. You never did. But—I’m goin’ to make you, Betty o’ mine.”

The wind was warm on his lips and about his neck. It came with the broad, even sweeping of a scythe from the bush-hills, and in all earth and sky was no sound but the rustle of its wings in the grass and its low breathing heavy with scent. Jim filled his lungs with its vigorous strength, and the gladness rose in him. That mad, uncertain fever which he had called love for Roseen had left poison in his veins. But earth and heaven and the free wind drew the last drop of it from his blood to-night, and the man-love that is neither fever nor imagination nor weakness, but is God’s Own Will, came to him, strongly, greatly, abidingly.

The earth was warm under his body. Almost he felt its heart beat against his heart. Almost he felt it move. For the first time he knew, as man may know, being made for eternity, the mighty living swing of it through space; the eager vigour; the linking of his own quickened clay with its great spinning bulk as it rushed on through the darkening night, with the myriad-myriad more homing each to its given place in the universe, as a lark homes to its brown nest in the earth.

Slowly out of Jim’s limbs, out of his soul, the last weariness of flesh and spirit drew off. Betty could give to him all that he needed. She belonged to him; by right of her sound, sweet womanhood; by right of that comradeship and understanding which had once been between them and which never had wholly

died ; by right of her frank, brave-hearted childhood, which had grown side by side with his own. And, above all, beyond all, by right of the earnest, merry heart in her which could call him higher when the earth-ways tempted, and make bright the working drab of the everyday world. He got to his feet with the wind blowing against his face. Down in the gully blinked the red Buntree lights through the thickening shadows. Among the clumped wattles and box on the hill late birds were calling. On a naked white gum close by a kookaburra chuckled, and Jim swung round to it with a laugh on his mouth.

“ It’s all right for you, old chap,” he said. “ You haven’t got to woo an’ win a Betty. She’ll do me up good an’ strong before I’ve finished wi’ her. But I’m goin’ to begin straight away.”

He began on the very next day. For Betty rode down the twisting track from Buntree under the heat of a summer noon, and Jim, coming home from a piece of work that had brought gravity to his face, caught her up and felt daring start alive in him as their eyes met.

“ You’ve no right bein’ out to-day,” he said. “ It’s sunstroke for the fellow who’s got a brain to be touched by it. An’ there’s a storm comin’. Look at that colour on Mount Wudyong. I’ve seen a man’s skin go just that thick purplish-blue.”

“ After you hit him ? ” demanded Betty.

“ Me ? I’m the most peaceable man livin’.”

“ A native devil is peaceable—because no one dares tease him,” remarked Betty.

“ The next time you call me names,” said Jim, with dignity, “ I shall go an’ tell mother. Ain’t you afraid

o’ bein’ eaten alive by bears like the naughty kids in the Bible ? ”

“ I’m never afraid,” said Betty cheerfully.

“ No ? I remember a girl who once rode through the bush by herself, an’ she told me long afterwards that she was sick afraid o’ the dark. So sick afraid that she wanted to lie down an’ bury her head in the leaves.”

“ I told you to forget that,” cried Betty, and her brown cheek was redder than any sun-kiss had made it. “ I’m always an idiot to tell you things. You’ve got too long a memory—and too long a tongue.”

“ Don’t want me to forgit it,” pleaded Jim, beating the rein-buckle softly against his knee. “ You don’t know what a comfort that is to me, Betty. When I see you catchin’ a hen by its tail-feathers, or plantin’ a glass o’ flowers over a dirty mark on the tablecloth so’s mother won’t see, or trimmin’ a hat wi’ forty-eight pins an’ a lot o’ soft stuff that a chap’d make into boot-laces if he handled it, or doin’ a heap o’ more things that I can’t do, I jus’ say to myself, ‘ She’s afraid o’ the dark,’ an’ that makes me feel a man again. For I am not afraid o’ the dark.”

“ That’s nothing to be proud of,” said Betty with a fine scorn.

He looked at her with the slow tender smile that brought the colour again.

“ I’m not. I am proud o’ you.”

“ You have no right to be proud of me.”

The bright defiant curls of hair and the well-set ear only showed now. But the colour burnt even to the lobe, and Jim grinned.

“ I’m goin’ to have the right some day,” he said composedly.

“ You are not.” Then, being truly a woman, she added : “ What are you going to be proud of me for ? ”

Jim swallowed down his grin.

“ When I think o’ a girl ridin’ alone for a night an’ a day through the bush . . . an’ chancing all that she had to chance from a hundred dangers . . . an’ facin’ all that she had to face among rough men wi’ brutal work to do . . . an’ cuttin’ off all her glorious hair jus’ for the sake o’ one man——”

“ I didn’t. I did not. It was for auntie——”

“ So you told me before.”

“ Well ; you believe me, I hope ? ”

“ O’ course. When you want to be believed. You don’t want to be, just now, Betty.”

Her whip-hand went up, and he caught it before Myall obeyed its command.

“ Hold on, Betty. I’m not goin’ to make you angry. I don’t say you did it for love o’ me. I don’t think that much o’ myself, dear. But some day I am goin’ to make you love me, an’ then you’ll be glad that you took that ride for sake of a man who loves you better than you’ll ever know.”

Betty went white as her neat linen collar, and her heart stood still for a moment. The giddy haze of the road ; the click of opening she-oak cones in the heat ; the smell of the wet saddle-leather and the dried gum-leaves swamped her senses so that she scarcely understood his words to the full. Then, somewhere on top of the mixed emotions, fright seized her, and sudden thoughts pelted into her brain like hailstones. She was not ready. She was not sure. Not sure of him or of herself. He was too big, too easy, too self-

controlled. He knew life as a man knows it and a girl never. He was not the Jim of her childhood. He was not the Jim whom she had once known, but some one who was far off, whom she did not understand and who must not understand her. She jerked her arm free.

“Of course you love me,” she said lightly. “And I love you. We have been brother and sister too long to doubt that.”

Jim looked at her with tender, quizzical eyes that her own dared not meet. Then he reached up in the stirrups, broke a wreath of blossoming tea-tree where the great bushes arched over the road, and wound the long scented thing in Miladi’s mane.

“There are some women make me think o’ that flower,” he said. “It’s got such clear, starry eyes lookin’ out on the rain an’ the wind an’ the lonely places wi’ all the pluck of some women. An’ it keeps brave right to the last, an’ then its leaves all drop at once like a boat goin’ down wi’ the flags flyin’. Nothin’ o’ growin’ old an’ dull an’ rotten like a garden flower. It’s the bush-flowers an’ the bush-girls for wear.”

“Well, this one’s worn,” said Betty. “Worn out. I’m too hot to think or to speak or to see, and I’m going home. Good-bye.”

But in her own room she forgot heat and all else. She ran to the glass, staring at the face it flung back to her with a child’s frank anxiety. Her eyes showed the dazzle of blue sea-water, and the colour fluttered in her cheeks and on her trembling mouth. Then the lip dropped in disappointment.

“You’re not really pretty, Betty,” she said. “You’ve

got freckles on your nose, and your mouth is too big, and you've no right to have red hair with dark eyebrows. Betty, Betty, I wish you were prettier. I wish you were prettier—for him."

Then she crushed her face in her hands, and slid down beside the bed.

"Oh, I don't know," she whispered. "I'm afraid. There was Roseen, and he has forgotten her. He might—some day he might forget again. I don't know what a man's like. Perhaps they care differently from a girl. But if I let him see that I—that I—and then if he forgot—oh, Jim, Jim; I daren't. Jim, I mustn't ever let you see."

But when he caught her at the pump that night, and put his hands over hers and took the bucket from her, and scolded her with the quiet air of possession that was new and utterly uncombatable, Betty's defiant tongue failed her for a space and she gave meek obedience with scarlet blushes that afterwards brought tears of wrath from her in secret.

And thereafter she "did Jim up" as completely as even he had prophesied. In three weeks he never saw her alone. She had jibes pointed with bitter wit for him; she had indifference; she had the careless good-nature that balked him more surely than all. And sometimes, when his eyes and speech puzzled and upset her, she had a flagrant rudeness such as one evening brought the Kid's heavy artillery to rake her from conning-tower to keel.

"Hack and I are going away very soon," said the Kid, "and s-so I'll c-chance telling you what I think, Miss Betty. I think women—except Mrs. Kyneton—have less sense of j-justice than an animal which tries

to bite you when you go to take it out of a t-trap. It doesn’t know any better. But a woman pretends to k-know better—and she doesn’t.”

Betty sat on the wood-pile, beating her heels on the logs. The evening sky behind her was the delicate green-and-red speckle of the egg of a mountain thrush, and the strong smell of new-cut gum-chips filled the warm air. Jim and the Kid were chopping the gum-chips; and a flippant speech of Betty’s had brought the Kid upright, with his thin cheeks flushing and his hard, roughened hands gripping on the axe. The Kid was a stern man in these days, with the flail and the scourge ready for himself and for the next evil-doer alike. Betty glanced up at him impudently.

“You can’t classify women in the bulk,” she said. “We’re all samples. Eve set the fashion.”

“You can follow that thread o’ reasonin’ all through,” remarked Jim, dragging out a log and casting it across the chopping-block. “We are all ready to believe that God made us. But we’re not so ready to believe that God made the other people.”

Betty reddened. Jim’s speeches came, like his blows, with suggestion of greater body-weight behind.

“That doesn’t matter,” she said. “We are meant to think differently. We each have to dance to the tune our own heart beats.”

“In couples,” said Jim, driving home his words by the steady ring of the axe. “In couples, Betty. An’ the tune can be rag-time. Or a full-band orchestra. Or a funeral march. Or a weddin’ voluntary——”

His eyes caught hers as he swung back for the blow, and something in them brought her answer hurriedly.

"It's not a voluntary," she said, and broke off, scarlet at his low chuckle of delight.

"What are you bettin' on that?" he demanded, and chuckled again as the axe fell.

Betty gave no answer. She kicked her heels and watched the Kid gather his double armful of wood and stagger across the flags with it. The sunset was blood-red about his feet and over his thin, straining shoulders, and a woman's pity for him blotted out Jim for the moment. Even as Jim had said, the Kid had a hard row to hoe. He was hoeing it bravely, making no complaint, and he would be the better man for it. But all the train of memory that his lanky, stumbling figure brought before her was too strong for Betty yet, and she looked hastily from him to Jim.

Jim was working with the long, clean swing of axe and arm that tells out the bushman. He had all the power and the grace of a man who is glad in his strength and in the use of it. The muscles moved smoothly under the brown skin of the arms; they rippled down his neck to the loose band of his shirt, and suggested themselves in every sway of his body. There was virility and action and the lithe ease of a poplar tree in him, and the firm-set lips and squared chin told the mental strength that equalled the physical. The raw logs sobbed as the axe bit into them, and over the wood-pile the fat white chips spun humming like hiving bees.

Betty sighed happily. All the night, all the world, was sweet and good and brimming with beauty and strength. Slivers of light from the sunset ran up the blade of the kelly axe to Jim's hand, and the reflection of it burnished his square forehead and his roughened

hair. Then a couple of quarrelling magpies, flailing wings and bodies like maddened black-and-white windmills, fell a-top of him, pecked each other with a last curse of wrath, and flew away together in silent peace. Jim leaned the blade on the block, and looked at Betty.

"All animals agree the better for a little squabblin' now an' then," he said.

Betty looked at her shoes in serene unconcern. She was beginning to wish she had gone in before. Jim chuckled again, stooped to gather the logs, and set his mouth to a tune that Betty knew well. She bit her lips and sat silent. The whistle ran sweetly to the last line of the chorus, then it broke into words :

"Oh, *don't* make . . . dem scand'lus eyes . . . at me."

Betty bit her lips again. Then she gave in and laughed.

"When a man is clothed in his own self-conceit he's warmly clad," she said.

Jim came over and sat on the wood-pile beside her. He was breathing quickly still, and the red that the hard work had brought there showed on his forehead and on the palms of his hands.

"I've had all my conceit knocked out o' me, Betty," he said, and the raillery was gone from his voice. "You've managed to make me feel pretty small cocoa nuts once or twice. Not lately . . . I wouldn't have you stop your pretty foolin' now, dear. I mean last year, Betty. Last year, when a girl took a two-day trip through the bush wi' a man who was blank crazy wi' grief, an' rage, an' want o' rest, an' who was lookin for nothin' but to put a bullet through himself . .

an' who would ha' done it if the girl hadn't been along. He was a brute to her, Betty, when she told him she was comin'. He couldn't see anythin' clear then. But he's seen it clear since. I reckon he about knows by now a good bit o' what that trip meant to her from beginnin' to end."

His tone had dropped. It was low and tense and very full of feeling. Betty was white to her trembling lips.

"You wouldn't have done it, Jim," she whispered.

"I would. I think you know that as well as I do, Betty."

The house and the bush behind swam, big as six, in Betty's eyes. Then the tears fell hotly on her hand. Jim picked up a strip of bark, snapping it between his fingers.

"It does a man good to know himself for a cur once in his life," he said. "Not more than once. I hope I'll never have to know it again. I thought I could stand up to anythin', but it took you to keep me on my feet then. I can owe that to you, Betty. I don't know as I could owe it to any one else an' hold up my head still."

"You'd had too much to bear," said Betty. "You were not yourself, Jim. You—you loved them both so much."

"That's ri-ight"—it was the slow Australian idiom of assent. "I had lost them both through my own doin', an' that's where it hit me so hard. I should a-stood off her from the beginnin', Betty, an' then Nick might be livin' to-day. I shall miss Nick as long as I'm above ground, an' I'll go huntin' for him after. But I don't believe that any trouble a man's called on

to shoulder ought to take the sweet out o’ life for him. I don’t think it does if he’s got his head screwed on right. I’m lookin’ for sweet yet, Betty. Are you goin’ to help me find it ? ”

He laid his hand on hers, and the smile in his eyes brought her to her feet in swift defiance. Jim was too sure. And she was not sure, and—in some way—she was afraid.

“I’m sick of helping you to find things,” she said. “It was your collar-stud on Friday, and it was the left eye of that doll for Annie Malony last week, and it was your way into the coal-house on Sunday night. A woman has something else to do with her life besides acting as candle and finger-post for you.”

She turned on her heel and left him. Her head was high and her step firm. Behind her she heard Jim speak to Sinner, who came, biting in affection, at his legs.

“Cheer up, old man,” said Jim, and his voice carried clear in the stillness. “She’s scared of the dark, you know. You chew on that bone, an’ don’t git your tail down.”

Sinner barked eager approval, and Betty fled into the house, struggling with unwilling laughter.

CHAPTER XVIII

THROUGH DARK TO THE LIGHT

“THE Kid swears that it’s Soutar,” said Saltire. “Carleton lost a horse last night, and the Kid saw a man sneak out of the stable at some late hour in the evening. He gave chase, but he can’t make very good time with that lame leg of his, you know.”

The sweat and dust of a three day’s race through the bush clung to Jim yet, and his walk was stiffened by long hours in the saddle. But eyes and brain were alert, and he put his swag on the table and leaned his hands on it, looking at Saltire.

“It’s the kind o’ dirty work the fellow would choose,” he said. “But he’s mad to come back here. Ravin’ mad. Hamstrung, was it?”

“Yes. Carleton’s best mare. He is clean crazy over it. Had Soutar a spite against him, Jim?”

“Soutar had a spite against every man livin’,” said Jim slowly. “I reckon he has a bigger spite against me than most, though. I’ll look him up if you can give me any idea o’ his bearin’s.”

“Go to the Kid,” said Saltire. “He may have noticed more than I heard. And keep a strict look-out for anything you may hear or see. But I needn’t tell you that. He’s evidently slinking about in the bush somewhere, and only coming out at night. We must lay our hands on him if possible, Jim, for I am rather

wanting him myself over that business about the forged wires."

"It's strange where he has hid himself all these months," said Jim. "Amazin' strange. What does Machonichie say, sir?"

Machonichie was the sub at the Police Station. Saltire smiled.

"He says, 'Begob, lit me git howld ov the foine gintlemen, an' he won't be knowin' which ind ov lasht wake he come out ov whin Oi've done wid him.'"

Jim laughed and picked up his bundle.

"I must take care he fastens on to the right man if ever he comes to grips," he said. "Mac is as hard to whip off as a bull-dog. I'll just go up an' see the Kid, sir. He may be able to tell me somethin'."

The Kid was hoeing potatoes in Carleton's garden-patch. Since he had split his foot with an axe in the summer, the Kid had lived on odd jobs and crutches, earning when he could and going hungry when he could not. For the Kid would take charity not even from Katherine, although she cried over him many times.

"Don't you s-see?" he told her. "It's my only chance ever to be able to h-hold my head up again. If I n-never spend a penny but what I earn myself, and never eat a meal but what I can pay for, I m-may learn to think myself an honest man again some day. But once I began to take charity . . . don't ask me to do that, please."

He met Jim's different argument with the same answer.

"I know I can't knock round with H-Hack for a long time," he said. "But Hack's going to wait a

while for me. And I won't take any money from you to set me up somewhere else. I'm going to stay h-here and face it out. It's m-my expiation, I think, and—and I rather like to do it, you know. D-don't you see that it is better for me, Jim ? ”

Jim had seen, and gone away with a lump in his throat. For the Kid's Sunday-school training, or something else, was bearing very noble fruit.

Now, at Jim's question, the Kid straightened his long back and rested his lame foot, looking at Jim with thought in the blue eyes.

“ He m-made off westward,” he said. “ D'you know it has struck me once or twice that he might be living in Wapshott's Cave. It's a dandy hiding-hole, and S-Soutar is a good enough bushman to live well there where I s-starved.”

“ I'll go up on Thursday. No time before. I've got to get out as far as Riley's Hill to-morrow, an' it will take me the best part of the next day to git home. But I'll tell Mac to keep his eyes skinned, and Saltire is stayin' down here for a day or so. If you come across anythin' in your pokings round, let them have it at once, will you ? ”

“ All right,” said the Kid.

He lifted his hoe again, and Jim saw him wince as he put the weight on his lame foot.

“ Come in an' have a nip, Kid,” he said. “ Just once won't hurt you, and that blamed foot gives you beans, I know.”

The Kid shook his head.

“ N-no, thanks. I've had to cut that. If I c-came once I might be looking for you to ask me again. And t-that won't do, you see.”

It was the plucky smile that Saltire had noted there long ago. Jim hesitated a moment.

"By Jove, Kid, you're the right stuff," he said huskily, and went off down the street with more swiftness than was necessary.

The possible coming of Soutar into his life again troubled him with an almost superstitious dread. For he loathed the man as one may loathe a snake.

"If it is him," he said, "he'll be after Miladi all right. I reckon I'd better keep an eye on the old girl to-night. And . . . I'll go up home this afternoon."

And so it happened that Betty, coming across the clearing behind the old house with a basket of mushrooms, looked up and saw Jim waiting for her by the stile. Jim had seen her first, with the gray of the autumn sky about her, and the crows flying low, with noisy calls and harsh foretellings of winter. For though the changes of the year score no change on the great gray-leaved gum-forest, and take no special toll from wattle and pine and honeysuckle, the willow trees and the poplars stood naked already to the chill winds, and all the restless, eager life of insects and flies and nesting-birds seemed sloughed off the earth, leaving it blank and silent.

Betty walked swiftly, swinging her basket. Her skirt was short, and her free, light step, and the poise of her body, and the set of her bright young head gave colour and vigour to the grayness. There was a rollicking little whistle on her lips, a raciness in the tilt of her chin, a glow on her cheeks, as she neared him that upset Jim's resolutions as completely as a cow kicks over a bucket of milk.

"Hallo," she said cheerfully, and set her foot on

the lower step of the stile. "So you're back. Machonichie says, 'Begob, ahl that ye know ov that Jim is he niver is where he was, sure.' Mind my basket."

Jim reached his hand to her in silence. But as she came over the top he pushed her back on the step gently.

"Sit down there a minute," he said. "I've got somethin' to say to you, Betty, an' we'll have it out now. Don't you think we've been fencin' long enough, old girl? I'm off again to-morrow, an' I want the memory o' somethin' to take with me. You know what it is, Betty."

He knelt one knee on the step by her foot and turned her face to him.

"Look at me, Betty o' mine," he said. "We'll put playin' by for a little."

Tone and action were reverent and very tender. But a thread of possession ran through them, and Betty remembered with a sudden shiver that Roseen had told Jim that Betty loved him. She jerked herself back.

"Don't," she said. "I can turn my own head when I want to, thank you."

"Now, you keep that little temper o' yours quiet, or p'raps I'll kiss you, Betty."

His hands were over hers, holding her. His face was very near, with mirth in it and a strange, deep earnestness that Betty's frightened eyes did not see.

"Don't be scared, darlin'," he said. "You know I'm wantin' you. You know I've been wantin' you this long time. I'm wantin' you all the days o' my life an' after my life too, Betty."

Betty sat very still. The poison of Roseen had

gone from Jim's spirit, but it was in Betty's blood yet. So had once Jim spoken to Roseen, so had he told her of his love. Only he surely had loved Roseen better, for there was not now that in his face and voice which Betty had seen there after Roseen's first kisses.

"I . . . can't," she said, half-choked. "Don't ask me. I can't."

"Why? Is Hack——?"

"No. Oh no."

"Is there any one else?"

"No."

"Why, then?"

Betty sat silent. His words had hit her quickly, jerking the answers out as fast. Now she shivered, looking down the gray distance where mist began to rise.

"Is it because of Roseen?" Jim spoke slowly, and his voice was changed.

Betty held her tongue.

"Betty, is it because Roseen came first?"

That impelling force which men knew pulled speech out of Betty.

"Y-yes. I-I suppose so," she stammered.

Jim stood up, hitched his belt, and threw back his shoulders. Senses and sinews were rousing in preparation for the fight which he saw to be coming.

"You're reckonin' as I haven't the right to offer you a love that isn't new," he said. "Betty, till love has cut its second teeth it's nothin' but a suckin' baby. I reckon there are few women an' fewer men who haven't tasted pap half-a-dozen times an' called it love. Till they got their second teeth an' began on meat. Then they knew the difference. I know the difference now. But I didn't know it before, Betty."

"You thought you did," said Betty, and her voice was cold with the effort.

Jim knit his black brows. With his straight common-sense he had not looked for these side-issues, and his feet were going astray already.

"Yes. I thought so. But a man don't always know himself at the beginnin'. I know now wi'out any mistake. She was callin' up the worst o' me, an' I felt it. You're callin' up the best."

"B-but you loved her."

"I loved her. Yes. But the flower has to come before the fruit. I had the flower in lovin' her. It's dropped off, an' the fruit is there, ripenin'. I reckon it's been ripenin' for you all the time, dear, though I didn't know it. You believe that I love you, Betty?"

"Yes."

"Then what's troublin' you, darlin'?"

Betty stared into the creeping mist, and her heart was chill as the day. Jim had loved Roseen, loved her with a passion in tone and face that was not there now . . . and already she was forgotten.

"I—I'm afraid," she said, and shivered.

"What of, Betty?"

She did not look at him. She could not guess what his face might be saying. Somewhere up in the gray a lark climbed joyously, dropping down his ladder of sparkling notes, rung by rung, that human souls might mount by them to heaven. But there was no answering joy in Betty. If anywhere in the long years ahead Jim should forget again, then it were better for her that she should never know the sweetness of now.

"Is it because I knew you first an' passed you by for her? Can't you forgive me for that, Betty?"

“ Oh, it isn't that. Oh no.”

“ Do you think that I haven't forgot her ? Do you think I love her still ? ”

“ No.”

Jim fumbled silently with the puzzle for a few minutes more. Then he leaned his knee on the step again and put his arm round her.

“ You've boxed the compass for me all right, my girly,” he told her. “ What is it, Betty ? I give it best.”

The laughter was twitching his lips, and she knew it. To Jim it was just a kink in the woman-nature that a man-hand could straighten out. To Betty it was a horrible dread of what might be, and she brought her stammering lips to prove it.

“ I know you have forgotten her. But if you—if you should——”

“ We-ell ? ”

The slow Australian voice made it two syllables. And they were two too many for Betty.

“ Oh, don't,” she cried desperately. “ Let's forget all about it, Jim. What's the use of being in love, and in the seventh heaven, and all that sort of thing ? We have to come back to earth after a while to do our work. And then we do feel the change of climate so dreadfully. It often gives people colds in the head and red eyes for months—perhaps for always.”

“ What does that mean ? ” said Jim gravely. “ Does it mean that you don't trust your love—or mine ? ”

Betty was silent. She felt herself growing stone under his eyes.

“ Does it ? ”

“ I—I suppose so,” blurted Betty.

Jim's arm left her waist. He stood up. Above them the lark was yet dropping his ladder of song. But neither of the two were thinking of heaven.

"I don't think it's given to any man livin' to understand a woman," said Jim at last. "I don't understand you. I know my own feelin's over this. Don't you know yours?"

"Yes," said Betty stonily.

Then suddenly Jim came to her side again, and his breath was close on her cheek.

"Betty," he said. "There's somethin' I want to ask you. Is it yourself you don't trust, or me?"

"You," said Betty.

For a little space Jim was silent. Then he said slowly:

"I'll give you a while to think over this, Betty, an' then we'll have our last round-up. I put Roseen out o' my heart because she made me feel disgust an' contempt for her. I can never feel those for you, an' so I can never put you out o' my heart. You might remember that when you're settlin' what to do wi' me."

Jim was not good company for himself that night. He smoked too many pipes, and he thought too much. He understood Betty more fully than she knew, and there was no anger in him against her. But through the long hours he faced the position squarely, and he did not like it.

"I couldn't stand distrust," he said. "I couldn't stand that. She has got to believe in me altogether, or I've got to clear out. She cares; I know she cares. But she's got to wipe out that doubtin'. I reckon I deserve somethin' for playin' the fool . . . but this is goin' to be tougher on me than she knows."

On Thursday morning Katherine was startled over her scone-baking by the ring of his feet up the flagged kitchen floor.

"Mother," he said, "where's Betty? D'you think she'd lend me Myall? My old girl is played out, an' I got to go off up to Wapshott's Cave. Hack struck the trail there jus' now, an' the Kid swears it is Soutar's. An' the Kid's old mare was hamstrung last night. It's cut the Kid up worse than when he lost his toes, poor young beggar. Where's Betty?"

"In the yard." Katherine rubbed the paste from her hands. "You will want something to eat, Jim? And you've had so much work lately."

"Always a feast or a famine at this game. Yes, put me up a bit o' tucker, please. They'll have some-thing in my swag down at Carleton's, but a fellow can always do wi' extra. I must go an' ask Betty, for I daren't take a horse that can't stay at the bushwork."

He said nothing more than was necessary until Myall was backed out of the stall and Betty buckled the last strap of the rein. Then he came to her side.

"A stern chase is a long one," he said. "If it's Soutar, an' he gits a start, we may be away out to Gippsland or up into New South Wales before we catch him. For I've got to run him to a standstill, an' he's near as good a bushman as I am."

"I—I hope you'll get him soon," said Betty, fumbling the buckle.

"I hope so," said Jim.

He took the rein from her and looped it on the saddle. Then, by a sudden impulse, he swung round to her with his arms out.

"Betty," he said.

Betty whitened, made a half-step, and drew back.

"No," she said, very low.

A moment more Jim looked at her. Humour was mixed with the longing in his eyes as though he laughed at himself. Then his arms dropped.

"All right, dear," he said gently, and sprang into the leather, pulling up the reins.

"Good-bye, Betty," he said. "Take care o' mother." And then Betty caught his tunic as Myall moved.

"Jim," she gasped. "Jim . . . I . . . I hope you'll be back soon."

"Thank you, Betty," he said. But he did not look at her, and, even as he spoke, he drove the spurs in and Myall leapt through the open gate with a snort.

Betty stood quite still in the yard until Katherine laid a hand on her shoulder. Katherine had known Jim's desire long since, but she had not meddled with Betty's girl-silence. Now Betty looked at her, and her eyes were wild.

"I've sent him away," she said. "Auntie, I've sent him away. Will he ever come back to me? *Auntie*——"

"Do you want him back, Betty?" said Katherine gravely.

"I don't know," said Betty. "Oh, I don't know. I don't know."

She went through her morning's work blindly, in struggle with herself. For the knowledge that Jim knew of her love galled her, and the distrust in her soul was like the chafe of rough cloth on a wound.

Later she shut herself into her room, staring out on the naked poplars blowing in the wind. Her hands were gripped on the window-sill, and the bleak wind bit them, sending its chill to her heart.

“ Jim is out in this somewhere,” she said. “ And I don’t know when he’ll be back. And I don’t know what I’ll say to him when he comes back. Very likely he won’t let me say anything. Oh, Jim, if there hadn’t been Roseen.”

Up the kitchen sounded the throb of the Kid’s stick, and Katherine came to Betty’s door.

“ Here’s a letter for you, my lassie,” she cried ; and to Betty’s reluctant appearance the Kid gave fuller information.

“ Jim w-wrote it before he left,” he said. “ I hadn’t t-time to bring it up earlier. I was m-mending Mrs. Coohey’s pig-styes——”

But Betty had gone with the letter, and the door banged behind her in haste. Katherine smiled, stooping to swing the kettle.

“ You’re just in the right time for tea,” she said. “ Jim told me about old Lucy, laddie. Indeed, I’m grieved for you.”

The Kid dropped on the settle. Dejection was stamped on him from his ruffled hair to his bandaged foot.

“ I w-wanted to go with them,” he said. “ C-Carleton would have lent me a horse, and I’d g-give anything to help catch that brute. Hack has g-gone, and young Rory Davis. But they wouldn’t take me. A lame beggar is only in the way, I suppose. He’s no good to himself or any one else.”

“ This is not like you, lad,” said Katherine gently.

The Kid’s face went down in his hands.

“ It’s all right,” he said vaguely. “ But I d-did love that old moke. She w-was a three-cornered old brute, and she was always girth-galled, and she had

greasy-heel. But s-she belonged to me, you see. She was the only thing I had l-left."

"You have relations?" Katherine had not ventured here before.

"Not now," said the Kid.

He raised his head, staring into the fire. But those two words had told plainly all that the bitterness of imprisonment had brought to him. Presently he turned to Katherine, smiling.

"It's all right," he said again. "I've p-paid off all I owed for doctors and liniments and things, and my foot's nearly well, and Hack and I are going off before spring, and—and everything in the g-garden's lovely."

The familiar slang term brought quick tears to Katherine's eyes.

"If you would only have let Jim help you," she said.

"He did help me." The Kid's blue eyes were on her frankly. "He helped me loads of times. But, do you know, it helped me most when I knew he had done wrong too! Sounds funny, doesn't it? But up in the C-cave I was—I was able to give him a leg-up. Think of that! Jim! I had just about got to Dead Finish that night, you know; and when a better man comes along and asks a fellow to give him a l-leg up, it—it—well, I think it saved me, you know."

Katherine put her hand over his rough one. She was smiling through tears.

"Perhaps you'll have to help him again," she said. "Jim doesn't find everything in the garden lovely just now."

"Miss Betty?" asked the Kid. "Yes, I knew.

He w-wouldn't give that l-letter to any one but me for fear of it being lost. And I don't think he was in a very good temper, you know. He was bucketting the boys round a bit."

When Betty read the six lines in Jim's black, plain handwriting, she was very sure that Jim was not in a good temper. For Jim had forced her hand in sudden cruel decision to her and to himself.

"We'll have to be done with this," he wrote. "If you can't trust me to-day you won't trust me to-morrow, for you've known me all your life. I'll send you a message when I git back to Buntree, an', if you are not at the gate by seven that night, I'll never ask you again to let me be anythin' more than your brother
JIM."

Betty twisted the paper in her cold hands.

"I can't," she whispered. "I can't be sure. Oh, I'm afraid to risk it. If—if he ever should forget. . . ."

Down in Buntree Jim took his orders and gave them with the alert decision which sloughed off his slow drawl at times. Then he came out, with ringing spurs on the pavement, and looked at Hack and young Rory Davis.

"Saltire says we're to go till we git him," he said. "Are you on, you fellows? That's right. It may take one day or ten. Get your old hearse started, Rory."

Within a mile of the cave he spoke again, for they had ridden the trail in speed and silence.

"Soutar's got a mate," he said. "There was one horse so far. Now there's another come to meet him. Who's likely to be Soutar's mate, Hack?"

Hack rubbed his nose, reining back his impatient colt.

“What happened ter Cleghorn when he come out o’ free lodgins?” he suggested.

Jim slid off, dropped on his knee, and examined the trail.

“You’ve struck it,” he said. “That’s Cleghorn’s piebald pony. I thought there was somethin’ behind all this. Soutar’s a white-livered cur, but Cleghorn’s got stuff in him, an’ he’s workin’ Soutar wi’ a knife between the shoulders. It’s just the kind o’ game Cleghorn’d put up. The Kid, Carleton, Morland o’ the Rise an’ Shine . . . all men who gave evidence against Cleghorn. See?”

Then he wheeled, thrusting back his helmet.

“This is goin’ to be a bit funnier than we were lookin’ for,” he said. “I’m not sayin’ anythin’ to you, Hack; but, if Rory likes to turn back, I reckon neither of us will be thinkin’ the less o’ him. Cleghorn is not quite the same sort o’ handlin’ as Soutar.”

Rory Davis was a slow-tongued, dogged youth, in whom no one had found any special qualities save a very perfect horsemanship. But he grew angry with a heated rapidity that surprised the two men, and Jim grinned, swinging to the saddle again.

“I’m not meanin’ to insult you,” he said. “Come on, then. But give me the front seat, for I’m not sure o’ Cleghorn.”

They took the last pinch in utter silence, so that a kangaroo, cropping grass in the belief that nothing worse than a brumby was near, flashed upright in a sudden spasm of terror at the sight of man, and fled with beating tail toward the cave.

Jim came over the crest with hard eyes, and lips set by anxiety. There was the chance of alarm, and it

came even as he saw. For a man, smoking on the litter before the long rock-slit, sprang up, heard the tread of the horse, and dived into the bush with a shout. A second man leapt after, ripping his coat on the brambles; and Jim caught Myall with the spurs, and raced through the light scrub with his revolver speaking in unheeded warning.

Hack and young Rory were hard on his heels, and Myall tucked in his big black head and took the weight of the breaking branches on his forehead with a snort of delight.

It was a sharp race and a short one. For the men ahead were riding for their freedom, but the man behind was riding for revenge, and that cut deep. Since that day in the "Bushman's Rest" Jim had not seen Soutar until the evil face struck his sight for a moment as the man sprang out of the cave. And it roused in Jim all the fury which the shame of that unforgotten day had bred in him, all the hate that he had tried to kill when he knew what Soutar and Roseen had told over the wires. Hack and young Rory rode for joy of the chase. But Jim rode to capture his man.

Through the big timber the horses crashed down to the creek, with the crackle ahead to guide them. The men crouched low from the vines, gripping monkey-tight where a stiff branch reached to claw them out of the saddle, bearing on the rein when a hoof slipped on a stone, ripping in the spurs where the way showed open.

Down to the creek and across it, where big gums stood apart with no scrub between, and the men ahead showed, flitting shadow-wise behind the boles. Hack sent a roar of derision after them, and his wide-nostrilled galloping colt ranged up by Jim.

“ You’re wantin’ Soutar, I know, Jim,” he shouted, as the wind shrieked past in their ears. “ I’ll do wi’ Cleg. He did me out o’ a tenner onst.”

Jim’s lips were shut, and his eyes followed the flitting shadows as a needle threads through a darned sock. All the pain and desperation that Betty had left with him found vent in that which lay ahead. Even the cowardliest cur will show its teeth when it is cornered. And there was no coward in Cleghorn.

His blood was up, and the lust of the chase held him fast. The throbbing bulk between his knees seemed a part of himself, and there was nothing left in the universe but the knowledge that he was gaining, gaining on those two labouring, racing things ahead.

There was heath underfoot, pale, pink, and blood-red, with little flies swarming in it. The stiff crackle of the breaking heads sounded suddenly sharp in Jim’s ears. The trees dropped away, and the cold wind smote them broadly, and the horses stumbled on live rock, striking fire once and again. Scrub reared up before them, hiding everything, whipping their faces, tearing their flesh with the rough dried honeysuckle cones, sobbing like a man struck in the throat as the young saplings went down under the hoofs.

And the two men ahead grew nearer. Jim saw Soutar turn once in the saddle, and he raised in his stirrups, shouting his formula. But Soutar gave no answer, and the savage grip of Jim’s thighs sent Myall forward like a catapult-bolt. Hard behind them, and harder ; closing up until the blowing of the horses sounded loudly, until Soutar’s curses were distinct, and the rise and fall of Cleghorn’s flogging-hand carried sound with it. Bracken, dried and brown and golden,

rustled in the wind, rustled under the hoof, rustled out of hearing behind. Somewhere the black cockatoos were screaming harshly ; somewhere the smell of something dead and unseen gave understanding of a knot of flapping crows. The wetness of a swamp was about them, splashing them to the eyebrows, and the lignum twisted its tough roots and stems to hold them. They scrambled out with horses blowing and dripping, and, three lengths before them, Jim saw Cleghorn's pony peck and recover and Soutar slew away to the left. A patch of tea-tree hid them, and Jim came into it lying low along Myall's crest, and listening, keen-eared.

A bullet shaved the little fine leaves from a branch at his shoulder, and he jerked Myall back on his haunches.

"Hold on behind there," he shouted, and Hack, coming up full pelt, saw the eager gleam in his eyes.

"They're cornered," said Jim. "There's a limestone watercourse behind 'em, an' they'll have to fight it out. You clear, Rory. Hack an' I are goin' to rush them."

"Wha-at?" drawled Rory through his nose. And he ducked as another bullet whistled overhead.

Then Jim wheeled Myall and called for surrender. The gray scrubby tea-tree and the stunted box-bushes made a blind that hid the position. But Jim knew it by intuition.

"Cleghorn's pony is done, an' he's shootin' up out o' the watercourse. I got all my chambers loaded but one. Did Mac load you up, Hack? Dump down on 'em, then. You stand out o' this, Rory."

"You be blowed," said Rory, and spilt himself into the dried shelving creek-bed on the clatter of dead branches and loose limestone that marked Jim's way.

Through the thin scrub they saw the men, dark against the pale limestone. Cleghorn fired again, and Soutar's young colt reared at the flash. Behind Jim Rory cried out in sudden rage and pain; and then Jim was struggling with Soutar, one hand in the colt's mane and the other reaching for Soutar's revolver.

"Hand that over, you damned cur," he said, between his teeth.

Cleghorn, pumping lead with all his power, sent a stinging flash under Myall's nose, and Myall rose on his hind-legs with a scream. Jim was a rider born, and he clung to his seat. But Soutar wrenched free; whipped round, and passed Hack where he grappled with Cleghorn. And in that moment Hack's colt pitched on top of Cleghorn's pony, and the two men rolled together, with the last shot in Cleghorn's revolver to speak for them.

Jim sent one shot after Soutar, dropped on the two men, twisted Cleghorn over and snapped the handcuffs with a rush of fury that gave him the strength of six. Then he pulled Hack up, and Hack's face was black with the powder, and a furrow ran through his light hair.

"Rory's hit in the arm," said Jim, and swung his leg over the leather again. "You got to take him an' Cleghorn back best way you can, Hack. I'm goin' after Soutar."

He was gone before Hack knew it. And then Hack rubbed his head and stared at Cleghorn.

"You've saved me somethin' in hair-cuts," he remarked dryly. "Come over here, Rory. What's the sense o' you, eh? Bleedin' like a stuck pig when yer should a' bin lickin' along wi' Jim."

“Will—will I lose me arm?” stuttered Rory, sick with fear.

Hack grunted, ripped up the sleeve, and tore it to strips.

“More like ter lose yer head when we git back,” he said. And, very truly, that night in Buntree Rory walked in a cloud of honour that hid him even from himself.

Hack went out to the stone house and saw Betty alone for three minutes. He had taken his defeat as a man, and he was man enough to speak for Jim now.

“I’d go after him agin if it was any good,” he said. “But he got too big a start. Him an’ Soutar hes got ter settle it on their lonesomes ’way out there, Miss Betty.”

“Yes,” said Betty.

Hack looked at her, shuffling his feet nervously.

“Jim pulled me out o’ a hole onst,” he said. “Ef I cud do the same by him . . . ef yer knowed what some fellers thought o’ him, Miss Betty——”

Betty turned on him with head up and flashing eyes. Hack winced. He had not yet learned to watch Betty unmoved.

“What has Jim said to you about me?” she demanded.

“Nothin’. ’Tain’t likely. But he gave me my chanst, an’ . . . well, he ain’t gittin’ his. Jim’s a better feller than a girl’d p’raps know, an’ I thought . . . I thought . . . I ask pardon ef I’ve said what I didn’t orter, Miss Betty.”

Hack backed away. But Betty did not see him nor hear. She was looking away through the cold moonlight to the ranges. Somewhere up in their chill deso-

lation Jim was on the trail of the man who had done him much evil, and who would do him more if the power was his.

It had come to the fighting chance now, and Jim knew it. They were man and man, good bushmen both, and both desperate. A sin that Jim never spoke of had first put Soutar outside the pale of Jim's friendship, and the doings of later days had kept him there. Now, as he followed the trail that was blazed to him alone, he knew that he, with his own hand, was bringing to Soutar the retribution that God desired of him.

Through the gray day to the nightfall, from first glint of sunrise through the next grayer day, Jim pushed Myall on with no more rest than was needful. There was no thought of rest in himself. All his soul and body were tingling to meet Soutar, and to prove on the man's flesh the fulness of his obligations.

Soutar had doubled on his track, and was heading away from civilisation to the Alps. In snow-country the best man and the best horse would win out, and the track over the Dargo High Plains was not yet closed by the winter.

"An' wi' my old girl I couldn't a-done it," said Jim. "She's game as they make 'em, but she hasn't the strength for this, an' Soutar knows it. I'm needin' a snow-plough like yourself, Myall, and . . . will Betty be glad that I've got you, I wonder?"

The tall timber sank away as the trail rose. Stunted gums and messmate bent in the bitter wind that raved out of the wilderness; grim rock-fortresses stood gaunt on the sky-line, and a powder of snow came underfoot. By the second midday Jim was battling with a blizzard, and the snow was thick on the low blue-gums, and

Soutar's track was clean gone. Myall pecked, pecked again badly, and Jim pulled him round with his back to the whirling snow, and halted to make decision.

Soutar would steer for the Dargo track. So much was certain. Therefore Jim also must steer for it, and sooner or later he would run his man to a standstill. Jim knew the ranges as a clerk knows his ledgers ; and he knew the forbidding cruelty of their snow-time, and the naked desolation of their heights, and the icy winds that raced over them, spinning the snow like great humming-tops along the rock-ridges and down the empty gullies.

The snow stuck wet fingers down Jim's collar. He lit his pipe with cramped hands, snapped the hurricane-cap, and wheeled out to the thick of the storm again.

"For it's keep goin' or freeze now, old man," he told Myall. "An' we've got to make for some place to back up against when we can't keep goin' any more."

Myall shook his head as the stinging wind hit him. Then he plunged again into the drifts, charging through them with his broad chest, and blowing the clogging snow from his nostrils.

Sky and earth were one maze of whirling drifts, with gleams of blue-gray gums stooped like old men under great burdens. The wind shrieked and hurled sharp knobs of frozen snow, and took breath, and swung round corners to fling them the harder. Jim's face was stiff, and his legs felt like compasses, and his blood seemed sluggish and chill in his veins. He dropped off, beating life and heat into himself by the struggle to keep Myall's pace, and climbing doggedly ever upward toward the one chance that was left him. A

bark humpy was set somewhere ahead, used as a tourist-shelter in the summer, and Jim laid his course for it by all the powers left him, jealously grasping at every moment lest the shapes of ridges and gullies and hill-tops should change beyond recognition.

Far, very far below, lay Buntree and the little stone house where Betty was waiting him. But was she waiting him? That doubt stung Jim as the sleet never had stung him yet, and he groaned, rubbing the drops from his lashes.

"If ever I git out o' this," he said. "If ever I git out I'll tell her again. But I can't have anythin' less than all . . . for her sake an' mine. O Lord! . . . am I goin' to git out o' this?"

The drifts were two feet, three, four. They were wet and soggy, giving hopeless foothold. They made wreaths on the scrub like the tea-tree blossom in the spring, and the scream of the wind as it galloped over the barren tops was wild and high as the scream of sea-gulls over a world as desolate.

Just before his face the bark humpy lifted itself like a clumsy tortoise. The door was shut, and Jim's hands were useless. He set his shoulder to the wood and burst the catch, stumbling into a smother of smoke that was cut through by a loud-flung curse and the jar of a man's heavy boots on the floor.

"Soutar," said Jim.

And, at the word, Soutar sprang for him, snarling like a wild cat, and clawing, scratching, spitting in a sudden madness of fury.

It was the primeval battle between strength and strength, between hate and hate, up there in the lonely hut, and Jim was bleeding and breathless and shaking

with the effort before Soutar collapsed and fell beside the smoky fire, writhing in the sweats of agony.

"I dun't care," he gasped. "It's me ter call now, Kyneton. I got the best o' you till the cows come home. You'll never take me back ter Buntree nor anywheres else. Oh! Oh, my soul——"

It was a scream of suffering, and it brought Jim on his knees beside the man in an eye-flash. He examined with quick hands and quick speech. Then he sat back on his heels, feeling very sick.

"I've been hammerin' you," he said. "An' you're a dyin' man. You've been a dyin' man this year past by the looks o' you. Did you know it?"

Soutar flashed his tobacco-stained teeth in an ugly grin.

"My oath," he said. "Don't I know it? I'm goin' to cash in up here. But not yet. Not yet. I got the pull on you jes' now, Jim Kyneton. You dassent go back . . . an' leave me livin' . . . ter die . . . alone. You ain't got the pluck fer that. So I'm goin' . . . ter kip . . . livin' . . . long's I can . . . ter starve yer out; —— you, I hate you worse'n I did long ago up at Cooleyanyong. I hate yer!"

Jim sat unmoving, and stared at him. In neither eyes nor soul was there any of that tender, strong humanity that other men knew. Soutar belonged to the days of Jim's unfledged youth, when something of the full-grown man's evil had warped the sappy fibres of the boy, giving his moral outlook a twist that it had taken him years to battle free from. There were landmarks over that hazy page, big and heavy ones, ending with the day when Soutar had blackened Jim's honour and fled, leaving the young man to redeem his

name at stern cost to himself. They had met next on the day when the little pink note had come between them to deepen Jim's unburied hate, and to curb it for sake of the woman he loved. There had been other things since this. They rattled through Jim's brain with the vivid assertion of an express train, the while he looked into the evil yellow face drawn into parchment lines by the pain.

Then he stood up, turned his back on the man, and kicked the logs to a sulky glare. Soutar was dying. But there was perhaps a week's life in him yet. And in the swag was one man's provisions for a three-day trip.

"Where's your horse?" he said abruptly.

"Dunno. Lost him in a drift. It was gittin' out of it . . . finished . . . me."

The panting voice dropped silent. Jim stared at the fire again, hearing the shriek and whistle of the storm and the hiss of the snow as it fell down the tin chimney. It would be four days probably before he could take the track again, and then the going would be very slow. Those rations were put up for one man only—and that man was not Soutar. Jim thought of Betty, thousands of feet down in the sunny Buntree gully; and God was far off from him, and the devil very near.

He wheeled, looking at Soutar.

"I've only got one man's tucker for three days," he said harshly. "You'll git your share, an' no more. I can't live on snow-water for a week, an' that's all to find up here. I've got myself to think o', an' I've never had any reason to think o' you."

Soutar rocked himself, for the pain was tearing him.

“Starve a dyin’ man, would yer?” he groaned. “Starve a dyin’ man? That’s you, Jim Kyneton. Starve a dyin’ man, an’ chew a pal’s ear. I heared what they was sayin’ o’ you in Dik Dik lars’ year.”

Jim controlled his tongue, thrust the door open against the pelt of the storm, and went out to find Myall backed to a stunted gum with his mane blown over his head. He slapped the wet flank with the broad of his hand, and his words were torn to shreds by the bellowing wind as they left his lips.

“I reckon you can make out on wire-grass an’ such truck for a bit, old man. But you won’t keep up your heart too long on that, an’ we’ll have somethin’ to plough through goin’ home all right. Soutar’s got us in a cleft stick, Myall. It ain’t only the Dargo track’ll be deep sinkin’ after this.”

He unhooked his short-handled tomahawk from the saddle, cut brush, and latticed it into a shelter for Myall; grubbed up some tussock and fern clumps, and did all that was in his power for the great animal that was Betty’s own. But when he dragged the saddle-gear and the swag into the humpy, exhaustion had its grip on him and his flesh was wind-bitten to raw scarlet. He slung the billy of snow-water on the hooks. And then sleep took him suddenly, tumbling him over in a corner with the yell of the wind as a lullaby.

He roused later as a heavy weight fell across his legs, and the reek of whisky fouled the air.

“What—what?” he said, rubbing his eyes with stiff hands. . . . “No; Bill an’ me are teetotal——”

And then the little rough room, and the dying fire, and the howl of wind and rain cleared his senses. He

glanced at Soutar, snoring drunkenly at his feet, and he knew. The little flask of whisky in his swag had meant life or death to men before now. There were odds that it was going to mean it again. He kicked himself free, shook out the rifled swag hurriedly, and found the flask dribbling its last drops over the trodden clay of the floor. With stiff, slow fingers he screwed the useless top tightly, and the furrow between his brows was deeper than Katherine had ever seen it.

"What's goin' to come out o' it all?" he said. "He's been at the tucker too. An' if——"

Soutar clawed at the bark-strips with his long nails, and pulled himself into sitting position, with legs stuck out straightly before him, and leering eyes on Jim.

"N-no, you don't, my cuckoo," he hiccoughed. "Put me off . . . tea, eh? An' flashk'n swag all . . . time. I know one berrer'n . . . that. . ."

His head fell forward, and he took his breath long and hard. Under the ill-fitting door the snow sprayed in softly, laying itself in pure white wreaths about his feet. Jim looked from him to the broken bread and the handled meat. Then his glance leapt to the riding-gear in the corner, and that spoke to him with loud tongues. At the hour when the snow ceased he would take saddle again. Delay was a madness, a death-madness. For winter had surely come, and winter on the Great Divide lets neither man nor beast see its might.

"I'll go then," he said, and rolled up the swag and stuck it between the rafters. "I don't owe him anythin', an' I'm not goin' to."

He went out again to the quick-coming gray night, and chopped wood until the dark shut down. Then he

built the fire high in the shanty, brewed some pallid tea, and smoked a half-pipe with jealous slowness. And still Soutar slept against the wall, and still the snow fell, and the wind took the humpy in its boisterous hands and shook it and buffeted it and danced on it, until Jim believed that the whole thing would go in one breathless instant, leaving Soutar and himself to face the last pinch of the track together.

And then Soutar woke with the madness of drink on him. And this presently passed to the dread of Death and the horror of Judgment. Jim could give him neither pity nor comfort; for love of his fellow-men was dead under the strain that was holding him, and mouth-words are worth nothing to a soul in anguish. It was a black hour that Jim lived over in nightmares through his later life. And then Soutar fell to an uneasy sleep again, and Jim faced his own soul and knew just why he had failed to give relief. But he knew also that he would continue to fail.

Day came again, with still the snarl of the wind and the gray drift of the snow through the mist. Death played with Soutar as a cat with a mouse—now bringing him to his feet in a virulent defiance of pain, and sending him staggering through the room, with cunning eyes and greedy fingers, searching for the tucker-bag or for Jim's little knobs of tobacco when he tried to dry them by the fire; and now casting him flat on the earth, cursing all things past and to be, and shrieking out his terror of eternal punishment between the twitches of body-torture.

Jim stood this as best he might, tending the man with patient care, going empty that Soutar might be fed, giving him even of his few handfuls of tobacco.

And Soutar crouched over the fire, wrapped in Jim's great-coat, and jibed him through the misery of them both.

"I'm payin' yer, Kyneton," he said, many times. "I'm payin' yer for takin' Roseen. Ain't I payin' yer good?"

For some reason unexplainable it was Roseen who tortured Jim most through the five days whilst the storm held. Roseen's fair face and hair showed in every snowdrift, in every puff of smoke, in every glimpse of flying cloud, or on the darkest wall. Roseen and Soutar were mixed up with all the evil of Jim's life, and their personalities pressed on him with palpable, horrible weight, blotting out all that was good and clean.

Each kiss that he had given Roseen, each tender word that he had spoken her, came close and mocked him now, thrusting Betty back like a pale ghost. Cold and want of food were lowering the vitality of a man used to big and regular meals, and body and spirit darkness seemed to hedge him round. He sat for hours unspeaking, with his head in his hands, and his eyes on the fire, and he let Soutar howl and curse unheeded. For he knew, as fully and clearly as he had ever known anything in his life, that he had got to forgive Soutar and to help him through the last slip-rails by the power of that faith which he himself acknowledged. And he knew that the whole of him revolted against the doing of it.

On the sixth day the storm broke, and Jim went out to a wide dazzling world of glory. From bent tree, and jagged pinnacle, and beetling, naked rock-face, the sunlight flung spear-shafts of brilliant gleams.

The world was an all-coloured jewel ; dead, silent as graves ; unspeakably majestic and aloof. The air was keen and clean as a sword-cut. But the sun put life to it, and the red blood quickened again in Jim's body, and all the virile strength of him called out for Betty, and for the good days to come, and for the men and the ways that he knew. Out before him, out and down beyond the crystal gullies and the peaks and crowns of glistening snow, he would find Betty again. Betty with her red-brown, tossing hair ; with her bright, breezy face, and her young buoyant figure, and the red lips that had so tempted him in these latter days. Betty with the true, pure heart and the frank, earnest eyes. Betty who drew all that was good in him ; who would not say him no any more when he came to her, hot and quick with his love.

Jim straightened, drawing the sharp air into his lungs. And light came suddenly to his heart and his eyes.

" I'm comin', darlin'," he said. " I'm comin' now. The snow's no whiter than your dear self, an' I'm not fit for you. But I'm comin' to you, Betty."

He wheeled, with head up and new decision in the swing of his limbs. And then his glance fell on the humpy, huddled to its eaves in the snow, and he remembered Soutar. He halted, suddenly stiffened, and his teeth showed a little below his lip.

" I can't," he said. " No one has the earthly right to ask it. I'll leave him the tucker—an' that's not more'n one meal. But I can't wait. Why should I ? I can't do him any good. He's a foul-mouthed, foul-hearted brute, an' . . . an' . . . O God ! don't ask it of me."

But up there, in the world that he had taken for his own, the world of range and bush and long, long distances, he knew that God had asked this of him, and he knew that he must give. For a greater time than he guessed he stood unmoving, staring over the glitter of unbroken white until his eyes went blind for the moment and he saw only Betty swinging her feet on the wood-pile in the backyard at home. Then he turned slowly, fed Myall with such rubbish as he could scrape together, and watched the old horse blowing over it in disgust.

“You won’t stand too much o’ this yourself, old man,” he said, with keen eyes for the roughened coat and the staring ribs. “Lookin’ tucked up all right, you are. An’ I can’t git home without you. That’s a dead cert. But—when am I goin’ to get home? I reckon I’ve got some pretty stiff work to do before that, Myall.”

It was growing to dusk when he opened the humpy door. His battle was fought, and he did not yet know the reward. But the sun, and the silent hills, and the serene purity of all things had put him in touch with Nature and Nature’s God again, and he knew that he could give to Soutar all that was required of him.

The firelight showed Soutar’s face mercilessly, and it was yellow and haggard, and drawn into deep, harsh lines. His lean body shook with every labouring breath, and his restless eyes roved round the little low hut, seeking the comfort that nothing offered. Jim came across and knelt beside him. His own lips were blue, and pure animal hunger was dragging at him.

“Feelin’ special bad, Soutar ? ” he asked.

There was something in the tone that Soutar had not noted there before. His eyes came on Jim swiftly, searching the strong, well-shaped face that suffering had marked unerringly. And in the face also was that brotherhood and pity which were new to Soutar.

“I’m not goin’ yet,” he snarled, wetting his dry lips.

Jim smiled a very little.

“All right. I guess we got more to say to each other before you do. You an’ me have had our knives into each other pretty deep ever since we first met, an’ I reckon it’s time we put that by. You’ve wronged me badly, Soutar, an’ I’ve wronged you. But we’ve got to put that by, man. You’re dyin’ fast, an’ I don’t know how I’m goin’ to come out o’ this yet. I reckon we can’t afford not to part friends, seein’ as neither of us may meet another man this side o’ Death.”

“I’ll take pity from the Devil first,” said Soutar.

“You can git it from him afterwards if you like. I come first. I come first because you near spoiled my life for me when I was a half-bake, an’ I’ve forgiven you for it. I don’t know if that int’rests you much. But you’d best know it, for I reckon there have been some men, an’ women too, whose lives you have spoiled . . . an’ they haven’t forgiven you, perhaps.”

Soutar writhed on the brushwood where Jim had laid him for ease. Terror fought in him with his dogged hate of Jim. Then something of it leapt through his parched lips and out to Jim’s hearing.

“Why d’yer make me think o’ all that agin ? Oh, curse yer, why do you make me . . . but I can’t forgit. I can’t forgit. There’s Baldy’s face lookin’ at me . . .

you know little Baldy Thomas, what I jockeyed out o' his billet at Koorunderee. An' Baldy hung hisself. Duchane's wife left him . . . he never knowed I'd anythin' to do wi' it . . . an' I keep rememberin' Duchane callin' me his mate. . . . Jim, Jim Kyneton . . . damn you! what am I tellin' you all this fer? You'll let on. I knows yer, Jim Kyneton. . . ."

It was well that Jim had had that day in the sunlight first, for he was sorely tried through that night and through the day that came after. And, when Death found Soutar at last, Jim's arms were about him, and Jim's steady voice in his failing ears was giving such comfort and strength as one man may give another when the Great Moment is for the one only.

Then Jim went out to the sunlight and the stillness and looked down toward Buntree. For the last days he had fed on a lean possum grubbed out of a hole, and on wild honey in the comb, and on snow-water. These things do not give a man vigour with any certainty, but the vigour of Jim's spirit was above that of his flesh.

"I'm comin' now, Betty," he said to the universe. "I'm comin', dear. An' I reckon I'm goin' to git through, if the snow is as deep as a house."

That journey was a dream through all his latter memories. A dream of white silences untouched by sound of bird or animal, unsmirched by colour of green tree or brown rock. And Jim took that journey alone with his Maker, and came to the understanding of several things through it. Brain and body were weakened and dulled, but something twitched eternally at the strings of his heart.

"A man can't touch pitch undefiled," he said. "I've

lost somethin'. I'll never be too sure o' myself again. An' I'll never think too much o' myself again. I am not good enough for my Betty . . . but I want her, an' she wants me."

The Kid met him at Carleton's door. And he pulled Jim out of the saddle with a sob stumbling on the stammer of his words.

"W-we thought you'd got p-pinched up there," he cried. "We w-were afraid . . . and I wanted to-to go after you. But Hack s-said . . . Jim, Jim, you—Carleton! Here, Carleton!"

Jim heard the hurry of feet and the buzz of voices. He heard Saltire demanding the production of Soutar, and he heard some one who was very drunk telling that Soutar was dead. He staggered forward to arrest the drunken man, fell over something that was not there, and forgot to take further interest in his surroundings.

Katherine was with him when the world took shape and sense again. But he looked beyond her.

"Betty?" he asked.

And then Katherine stopped his mouth with a spoon, and forbade speech until the bowl in her hands was emptied. Life and sense and eagerness came back to Jim with the strong soup. And his very fibres were shouting for Betty.

"Where is she?" he demanded, and Katherine laughed at him.

"Not here, dear. Do you want her now? Oh, Jim; you're a lover. You're a true lover, my son."

He stood, swaying on his feet. But frank understanding leapt from his eyes to hers.

"Yes," he said. "I know. I'm not fit to fight

for my life just now, mother ; but I'm fit to go to Betty. I don't want to ask you what she'll say. I'll find out for myself. An' the Kid will take you home. I can borrow a horse from Carleton."

He was stiff and numb when he took saddle again. But until he was near the little stone house he did not pull rein for one moment. And then it was to laugh.

"For I never sent her a message," he said. "But, if she's 'there . . . I shall know what it means if she's there."

At the gate he halted, and, in the starlight of the cold white night, he saw something move on the farther side. He slid off, knotting the rein over the post.

"Betty," he said. "Is that you ?"

"I—I suppose so," said Betty, and her voice shook.

Jim laid hands on the gate, and came through it quickly. Then he stood looking down on her. A close hood was over her hair, and the brilliant daring had gone from her. For these bitter days of dread had knocked the last pin out of her fittings, and her pride had come down with a run.

She gripped her hands together until the knuckles showed white as her face. But she did not speak. By the look of him Jim had come to her out of hell and death, and it made her afraid.

"What are you goin' to tell me, Betty ?" said Jim, gripping the gate-top, and feeling for words painfully. "I mean to have all you can give, or nothin'. If the thought o' Roseen is ever goin' to come between you an' me, or if you're likely ever to doubt me again, or if you're goin' to git thinkin' that my love is less than it should be because I've loved before, tell me now,

Betty, an' git it over. An' tell me the truth, for I will not take anythin' less."

His voice was strained and unnatural. Fear was sickening him, but he would not show it.

"Are you to make both sides to the bargain?" she said.

"No. I've given you my true love an' my respect till I die, Betty. I'm not good enough for you, though I'm givin' you the best I've got. But, if you love me, you'll believe me when I tell you it is the best o' me. What did you come to tell me, Betty?"

Then Betty broke down unashamedly.

"I've told you every night," she cried. "I've come down every night, through the snow and everything, and I've told you out loud that I . . . that I don't care about a thousand Roseens or . . . or anything. I love you. Jim . . . I love you. And you . . . you are horrid. You never say a word. . . ."

"Let me try somethin' more than talkin'. Now . . . your arms round me. Give it to me . . . quick. Betty, it was the thought o' this only kept me livin' up in the hills."

CHAPTER XIX

“ LET US COME HOME ”

“ To love, honour, and obey,” quoted Jim solemnly.

Betty sat on the top step of the slip-rails in the bush-paddock and drummed her heels. Her head was bare, and spring was in her face and in the warm blowing wind. Jim was booted and breeched and spurred, and he stood before her with Miladi's rein hooked over his arm and laughter in his eyes.

But Betty did not look at him.

“ I said that last week,” she answered. “ It's your turn now.”

“ A man never has to say it.”

“ That doesn't matter. He has to do it.”

“ This man doesn't,” suggested Jim daringly.

Betty cocked her eyebrows, set her red lips to a whistle, and stared away through the scattered coolibah scrub where the big trees made landmarks. All the world was full of spring, full of gladness, and of beauty, and of merry bird-calls, and rustles in the leaves, and broken twitters of delight. Just opposite a brown hawk's nest hung in a red tuft of mistletoe, and beneath it a pair of yellowtails were building with much fuss and eagerness. The primrose patch between their wings showed like an autumn leaf in the middle of spring. And this, the first disagreement, was to Betty

also like the fall of an autumn leaf from the full-budded tree of her happiness.

Miladi jerked back, reaching for a bunch of grass, and Jim's lips twitched.

“Betty,” he said meekly.

Betty drummed her heels, whistling still. A magpie strutted out to the open, raised his clear black and white wings, and sent his answer carolling out on the sunny air. Jim sighed gently.

“One thing, there isn't goin' to be any monotony in our marriage,” he remarked. “We're likely to find plenty to quarrel about.”

“I wasn't quarrelling.”

“Then it must have been me,” said Jim in humbleness.

Betty kicked her heels again, biting her lips. Then she flashed a glance at him. Then another. Then she put out her arms.

“Jim,” she cried; “what are you an angel without any wings for? I want to be cross, and you won't let me.”

Jim gathered her close to him, rubbing his cheek against hers.

“It's just your unselfishness upsettin' you over this, darlin'. You think mother wants to live with us. But she doesn't, Betty. She an' I talked it all out clear long ago, an' she knows we're best left to ourselves. We have a lot to find out about each other yet, my Betty, an' we've got to do it our own way. Nothin's got to come between a man an' his wife, Betty . . . not even mother.”

“She wouldn't come between us——”

Jim turned her face up, looking into her eyes.

“Betty,” he said, “you an' me are likely to go to

market a bit before we settle down into a pair that's warranted quiet to ride or to drive. We've both got tempers, an' we love each other too dear not to git hurt wi' each other quicker than folk who care less. . . . Well, we've got to battle that out by ourselves an' git over it. We won't have a third person into our rows, my girlie."

Betty pulled his face down and kissed him between the eyes.

"I'm obeying," she whispered. "But I've just had a letter from her, Jim, and she—she seems so bright, the darling, that I know she's missing us as hard as ever she can."

"I know. I tell you it was a thumpin' weight off my mind when the Kid told me he was goin' to stay with her, Betty."

"I kissed him when he told me," said Betty reflectively. "I threw my arms round him and kissed him twice. You don't mind, do you, Jim?"

Jim chuckled, remembering the austerity of the Kid in these days.

"Not as much as he did, I guess," he said.

"Well," said Betty, "he did mind it a lot. I was surprised that he minded so much. He told me that women had no sense of proportion. I wonder if you and I are ever going to get our sense of proportion back, Jim? I never knew that earth could be better than all my ideas of heaven before."

"Bless your dear heart, my girlie," said Jim reverently, and stroked his big hand across her copper-red hair where the sunlight polished it to gold wire.

They were silent. And Miladi cropped the long grass placidly, with occasional clinking of steel as she

flung her head up ; and the wooing and the love of the bushland went on about them, unheeding the man and the maid.

But Jim was feeling all the fullness of life to the soul of him. He understood the cry of the little yellowtail when the bronze cuckoo balanced, bright-eyed, on the rim of the new nest, seeking where to lay its egg. He heard the joy in the twitter of the mistletoe-wrens, and the shy robins, and in the lovely rippling song of the thickhead with his vivid red breast showing behind the young gum-leaves like a blood-gout. And he felt the vigour in each great gum and messmate and blackbutt as they pulsed with the ascending sap of life. For life was quick everywhere—in the earth, on it, above it, spread over the sky of golden sunset glory. He drew a long, slow breath, and his eyes darkened with the keen, wild understanding of it all. For he was Jim of the Ranges still, although a better thing had come to him.

Then he lifted Betty down from the rails, and pulled Miladi out of her grass-patch.

“ Let us come home, Betty o’ mine,” he said.

And Betty linked her arm in his, and fell into step, and they went forward through the sunshine and between the mighty tree-boles together.

